



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Letcher-Nicholls, Thomas Max

Title:

“Unbearable Brightness”: a Study of Enchantment in Alice Oswald and Robert Macfarlane

Date:

2021

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/295838>

Terms and Conditions:

Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.

**“Unbearable Brightness”: a Study of
Enchantment in Alice Oswald and
Robert Macfarlane**

Thesis presented for the degree of Master of Arts,
The University of Melbourne.

Thomas Letcher-Nicholls, September 2021

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | 7 |
| Underland | 9 |
| Dart, from source to sea | 19 |
| Chapter 2 | 30 |
| Memorial—“excavating” the <i>Iliad</i> | 31 |
| Macfarlane and The Green Knight | 42 |
| Allegory and re-enchantment | 49 |
| Chapter 3 | 52 |
| Ghostly Natures | 53 |
| Haunted Time | 59 |
| A World Without Us | 66 |
| Conclusion | 72 |
| Bibliography | 76 |

“Unbearable Brightness”: a Study of Enchantment in Alice Oswald and Robert Macfarlane.

Introduction

After winning *The Guardian*'s First Book Award for *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), his first work of creative non-fiction, Robert Macfarlane published an article entitled “Call of the Wild”, which announced that, after a long period of parody, derision, and scepticism, “a revival of the British tradition [of nature writing] is underway”.¹ To support this claim, he pointed to a resurgence in non-fiction nature writing with a deep engagement with the natural world, evident in works by Richard Mabey, Roger Deakin, and Jim Perrin, and also to poetry, specifically Alice Oswald's book-length poem *Dart* (2002) about the eponymous river in Devon, which had won the T. S. Eliot Prize the previous year. “Why, though”, asked Macfarlane, “should any of this matter? Literary genres come and go: why should this one in particular be grieved or celebrated?”. In response to that question, he posited that in a time of increasing “cultural cynicism and disconnection”, if nature writing were to disappear the result would be a still greater disregard for and disconnection from nature: “The natural world becomes far more easily disposable if it is not imaginatively known, and a failure to include it in a literary regard can slide easily into a failure to include it in a moral regard”.

In the nearly two decades since 2003, the genre of nature writing has proliferated and, following a special edition of *Granta* magazine on that topic, published in 2008, has become known as the “new nature writing”. Scholars widely accept that contemporary varieties of this genre speak to—as Macfarlane's article already suggests—anxieties about human disconnection from the natural world and a growing sense of the scale of environmental crisis.² In the introduction to that edition of *Granta*, Jason Cowley dwelt on the idea of a separation, concomitant with modernity, that had divided humanity and the natural world. He concludes by writing that:

This issue of *Granta* is our modest attempt to contribute towards that long journey of reconnection [between humanity and nature]. At present, the human animal lives in but often strives to be apart from nature. None of us wishes to imagine what might come after nature, when we are gone.³

¹ Robert Macfarlane, “Call of the Wild”, *The Guardian*, December 6, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview34>.

² Joe Moran, “A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing”, *Literature & History* 23, no. 1 (2014): 50; Deborah Lilley, “New British Nature Writing”, *Oxford Handbooks Online*, April 2017, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-155>.

³ Jason Cowley, “Editor's Letter”, *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing* (London: Granta Publications, 2008), 12.

Cowley here offers a version of the well-known narrative that modernity has resulted in the “disenchantment” of the world and nature. According to this view—most often attributed to Max Weber and the later Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer—the historical process of “disenchantment”, by which is meant the presumed triumph of rationality over superstition, has resulted in the world being emptied of meaning and mystery, and this in turn (according to Adorno and Horkheimer) has culminated in the subjugation and domination of the nonhuman world by humanity.⁴ Recent scholarship has, however, sought to complicate this narrative—Jane Bennett has highlighted the continued presence of wonder and enchantment in modern life.⁵ Josephson-Storm calls the story of disenchantment a “myth”; and Bruno Latour argues that we are not nearly as modern as we think.⁶ Yet it is nonetheless a common claim in scholarship concerning the new nature writing (and in ecocriticism more broadly) that humanity needs to reconnect with nature through “re-enchantment”.⁷ This thesis explores precisely this idea of (re-)enchantment in contemporary British “new nature writing” as represented by the prose of Robert Macfarlane and the poetry of Alice Oswald. It argues that their work gives expression to a new concept of (re-)enchantment, which re-describes it as both wondrous and frightening, and that registers the fragility of living on today’s damaged planet.

I have chosen to explore the “new nature writing” through the work of Macfarlane and Oswald because they are among the most renowned figures in the field and both have substantial bodies of work which show every sign of being enduringly influential. Macfarlane is widely regarded as the most high-profile practitioner of “new nature writing”, having won multiple awards for his work, including the Wainwright Prize for UK nature writing for his most recent nonfiction work *Underland* (2019). A Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, Macfarlane is the author of five books of creative non-fiction: *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), *The Wild Places* (2007), *The Old Ways* (2012), *Landmarks* (2015), and *Underland* (2019). In 2013, he published a more experimental, though still non-fictional, novella with Dan Richards and Stanley Donwood called *Holloway*, recounting their journey through the “holloways”—paths “grooved down into the surrounding landscape”—of South Dorset.⁸ In 2017, he published *The Lost Words*, in collaboration with illustrator Jackie Morris, a collection of “spell-poems” aimed at re-acquainting children with language able to evoke the natural world, which won the 2018 British Book Awards “Children’s Book of the Year” and was shortlisted for several other prizes. A sequel, *The Lost Spells*, was published in 2021. In 2019,

⁴ Alison Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 231; Tili Boon Cuillé, *Divining Nature: Aesthetics of Enchantment in Enlightenment France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 5.

⁵ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 36.

⁶ See: Jason A. Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁷ Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature”, 232.

⁸ Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Penguin, 2015), 203.

the same year as *Underland* appeared, Macfarlane released a work of fiction, a novella entitled *Ness* (2019), illustrated by long-time collaborator Donwood.

Alice Oswald has been described as the UK's "greatest living poet".⁹ Her first collection of poetry *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996) was followed by *Dart* (2002). Her next collection was *Woods, etc.* (2005), and then *Weeds and Wild Flowers* (2009), illustrated by Jessica Greenman, and *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), which like *Dart* was a book-length poem about a river, in this case the Severn. In 2011 she published *Memorial*, an adaptation and transformation of Homer's *Iliad*, which was the first work of poetry to win the 2013 Warwick Prize for writing. *Falling Awake* (2016), another collection of lyrics, won the 2017 Griffin Poetry Prize, and in 2019 she published *Nobody*, a radical adaptation of *The Odyssey*. The last book on this list began as fragments commissioned to accompany paintings by the artist William Tillyer, which Oswald rewrote and expanded to become a book. In 2019, Oswald was elected Professor of Poetry at The University of Oxford and will be in that role for four years; she is the first woman in 300 years to hold that position.

This thesis will focus on four texts by these writers. Chapter one examines Macfarlane's *Underland* because it is his most recent work of non-fiction and, in the writer's own words, the culmination of his oeuvre to date:

For more than fifteen years now I have been writing about the relationships between landscape and the human heart. What began as a wish to solve a personal mystery—why I was so drawn to mountains as a young man that I was, at times, ready to die for love of them—has unfolded into a project of deep-mapping carried out over five books and around 2,000 pages. From the icy summits of the world's highest peaks, I have followed a downwards trajectory to what must surely be a terminus, exploring the storeys of place that lie beneath the surface".¹⁰

The first chapter will also focus on Oswald's *Dart* because it is her most celebrated work, arguably the masterpiece of her own oeuvre. It is her most extended poem about the natural world, tracing the river Dart's journey from source to sea. Chapter two will then focus on Oswald's *Memorial* and Macfarlane's *Ness* as two radical adaptations of texts (the *Iliad* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* respectively) that describe what Charles Taylor has called the pre-modern, "enchanted world". My readings of these two texts will demonstrate the ways that the poet and writer draw on the past to help us re-imagine the present.¹¹ Chapter three then draws all four texts together. By focusing on a writer of prose and a poet, then, my research goes beyond the narrow definitions of "new nature writing" from a scholarly field that often exclusively privileges prose, and I will show the innovative

⁹ Charlotte Runcie, "Is Alice Oswald Our Greatest Living Poet?", *The Telegraph* June 21, 2019 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/is-alice-oswald-our-greatest-living-poet/>.

¹⁰ Macfarlane, *Underland* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), 17-18.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 39.

ways that these writers are contributing to the genre and exploring forms through which our relationship to the natural world and thus the notion of (re-)enchantment can be rethought.

As Anneke Lubkowitz has pointed out, most scholarship concerning the “new nature writing” begins with Cowley’s introduction to the edition of *Granta* mentioned above—and, of course, this thesis is no exception.¹² But Cowley narrowly defined the genre as “the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue”. In his view,

The writers collected here are all on some kind of journey of discovery ... [but] they have no need to travel to the other side of the world to understand more about themselves and their relation to the world they inhabit. In this sense, many of the stories in this issue are studies in the local or the parochial: they are about the discovery of exoticism in the familiar, the extraordinary in the ordinary. They are about new ways of seeing. Many of the pieces can also be read as elegies: we know how our world is changing and what is being lost and yet we are powerless to prevent the change.

Since this account of the genre was published, scholars have variously examined the new nature writing’s exploration of local (often urban and industrial) landscapes and everyday encounters with nature; “self-conscious” engagement with the idea of “nature”; connection with the cultures of Britain and Ireland; and historical links to the environmental movement in Britain.¹³ Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Wild Places*, and *The Old Ways* appear in much of this secondary literature, as exemplary instances of many of the themes listed above, but so far *Underland* has been the subject of only a handful of long-form essays.¹⁴ *Ness*, meanwhile, has been almost completely overlooked.

Oswald’s poetry is regularly mentioned in scholarship on “new nature writing”, but it is very rarely explored because most scholars, following Cowley, limit their focus to non-fictional prose. Reviews and essays concerning Oswald’s work appear regularly in publications such as *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker*,¹⁵ but academic criticism of her work is largely limited to individual—though often incisive—articles focusing on her as a poet interested in sound and acoustics,¹⁶ or

¹² Anneke Lubkowitz, *Haunted Spaces in Twenty-First Century British Nature Writing* (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2020), 17.

¹³ See: Moran, “A Cultural History”; Lilley, “New British Nature Writing”; Jos Smith, “An Archipelagic Literature: Re-Framing ‘The New Nature Writing’”, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17, no.1 (2013) and Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁴ Saskia Beudel, “Going Under: Robert Macfarlane’s *Underland*”, *Sydney Review of Books*, June 10, 2019, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/robert-macfarlane-underland/>; Rebecca Giggs, “What Lies Beneath”, *The Atlantic*, July, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/robert-macfarlane-underland/590632/>; Jedediah Purdy, “A Nature Writer for the Anthropocene”, *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/06/jedediah-purdy-reviews-robert-macfarlanes-underland/591574/>; Colin Thubron, “Our Guide to the Underworld”, *The New York Review*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/07/18/robert-macfarlane-guide-underworld/>

¹⁵ See: Judith Thurman, “Alice Oswald’s Homeric Mood”, *The New Yorker*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/24/alice-oswalds-homeric-mood>.

¹⁶ Jack Thacker, “The Thing in the Gap—Stone Style: Alice Oswald’s Acoustic Arrangements”, *Cambridge Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2015): 103-18; Mary Pinard, “Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter”, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 17-32.

from classics scholars interested in her adaptation of the *Iliad*.¹⁷ *Memorial* is the subject of chapter two and three, so I will engage with that second branch of Oswald criticism there.¹⁸

When the concept of (re)-enchantment is discussed in relation to the “new nature writing”, it is often criticised for being overly invested in aesthetics at the expense of realistic description of the natural world.¹⁹ Indeed, Smith has suggested that one of the defining critical debates of the new nature writing is this tension between “fidelity and artifice”.²⁰ This debate will be addressed in chapter one, where I will argue that both Macfarlane and Oswald trouble the binary opposition, often taken for granted by scholars, between what are seen as “realist” (objective, factual) and “idealist” (creative, literary) methods of describing the world. I argue that the former is linked to “disenchantment” and the latter to “enchantment”, but that both ways of seeing are undergirded by ingrained divisions between subject and object, nature and culture, and human and nonhuman. Instead I show, through close readings of Macfarlane’s *Underland* and Oswald’s *Dart*, that both the writer and poet discard these binary oppositions to describe a world of lively, unruly and interconnected forces that overflow the divisions between human and nonhuman that have structured ways of writing about the natural world. This will in turn enable me to show that a new picture of the world emerges from Macfarlane and Oswald’s texts—along with a new sense of enchantment that describes the world’s interwoven and entangled forces and subjects.

Lubkowitz notes that “enchantment” has recently become a prominent topic in the fields of ecocriticism and new materialism, where it is often used to explore notions of nonhuman agency, with Jane Bennett’s “enchanted” or “vibrant” materialism the most notable example.²¹ But here enchantment is predominantly associated with the affective state of “wonder”, which has recently also been the subject of considerable academic attention.²² In chapter two, however, I will demonstrate that the entangled world described by Oswald and Macfarlane is not simply or naively wondrous. Instead, through this notion of entanglement, I will build a more complex picture of “enchantment”, which shows that in a re-enchanted world nature can pose a threat to humanity (or, more pointedly, we have the language to recognise the threat that under certain circumstances can be posed by nature).

17 Elizabeth Minchin, “Translation and Transformation: Alice Oswald’s Excavation of the *Iliad*”, *Classical Receptions Journal* 7, no. 2 (2015): 202-22; Corinne Pache, “A Word from Another World: Mourning and Similes in Homeric Epic and Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Classical Receptions Journal* 10, no. 2 (2018): 170-90.

18 Carol Hahnemann, “Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 22, no. 1 (2014): 1-32; Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff, “[M]emories and similes laid side by side: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Connotations* 27 (2018): 19-47; David Farrier, “Like a Stone: Ecology, Enargeia, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2014): 1-18.

19 Mark Cocker, “Death of the Naturalist: Why is the ‘New Nature Writing’ So Tame?”, *New Statesman*, 17 June, 2015.

20 Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*, 22.

21 Lubkowitz, *Haunted Spaces*, 5.

22 Louise Economides, *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

In the final chapter I look to negotiate these twin threads of the new enchantment, which together depict the world as both vibrantly interconnected and immanently dangerous. I argue that Oswald and Macfarlane’s new nature writing conjures “ghosts” that disclose the ways that we are entangled with our damaged world. In contrast to Lubkowitz, who offers “haunting” as a “counter-model to enchantment”,²³ I argue that ghosts and haunting are both from the start present in enchantment. For Oswald and Macfarlane our delicate entanglement with the nonhuman world might soon be undone through a catastrophe that we ourselves unleash. Their new enchantment thus shows us the fragile but also precious quality of our place in the world, while the ghosts of their new nature-writing offer us perspectives from the past and future to help us re-imagine the present.

²³ Lubkowitz, *Haunted Spaces*, 5.

Chapter 1

This chapter examines Robert Macfarlane's *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (2019) and Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2002). The former is Macfarlane's most recent work of creative non-fiction exploring the relations between humans, landscape, and literature—and in this text he shifts his focus from above-ground to underground spaces where he finds that time and space are differently, strangely experienced. The latter, Oswald's first book-length poem, describes the unruly, metamorphic movement of the river Dart in Devon from source to sea. It is a polyvocal poem composed from the voices of those who live and work on the river although, as the poet advises us from the beginning, "[a]ll voices should be read as the river's mutterings".¹ Both texts, I will argue, although very different from each other in form and genre, aim at the re-enchantment of the world.

When scholars and critics discuss (re-)enchantment in the context of the new nature writing, the charge of naivety, escapism or political disengagement is never far away. Author and naturalist Mark Cocker, for example, writes dismissively that:

One of the central concerns of the new literature is the idea of 're-enchantment', a diffuse term that seems to mean whatever the author wishes. What it usually involves is clothing a landscape in fine writing.²

For Cocker, re-enchantment involves emphasising aesthetics and literary style—"fine writing"—at the expense of factual, objective description of the natural world. By "clothing" the landscape, this kind of writing conceals "the truth of our fallen countryside".³ Other scholars have argued that enchantment might be an obstacle to recognising the complex entanglements of nature and culture. As Neal Alexander and David Cooper write, "enchantment may actually impede rather than enable reflexive engagements with place and mystify the cultural processes whereby landscapes are constructed and understood".⁴ Similarly, Anneke Lubkowitz argues that "the very idea of enchantment can hardly be separated from the 'Disneyfication of our experience with nature'".⁵ Critics like these, then, set up an opposition between realism (which is said to faithfully represent the natural world) and what they see as idealistic notions of enchantment. "Fine writing" is associated with the latter because it shifts attention from the natural world to aesthetics, literary style, and the creativity and intellect of the writer. The charge of "Disneyfication", moreover, suggests literature makes the world into a source of enchanting wonder which obscures its true reality.

¹ Alice Oswald, "Foreword," in *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

² Mark Cocker, "Death of the Naturalist: Why is the 'New Nature Writing' So Tame?", *New Statesman*, 17 June, 2015.

³ Cocker, "Death of the Naturalist".

⁴ Neal Alexander and David Cooper, "Introduction: Poetry & Geography", in *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry*, eds. Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 4.

⁵ Anneke Lubkowitz, *Haunted Spaces in Twenty-First Century British Nature Writing* (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2020), 4.

This chapter, however, argues that Macfarlane and Oswald disrupt both the realist *and* idealist ways of describing the world. In *Underland* and *Dart*, I uncover a reflexive awareness of the inadequacy of both the “disenchanted” and “enchanted” ways of representing the world. Instead, I posit that a new picture of the world emerges from these works—and with it a new sense of enchantment. Recognising that the world is far more entangled, lively and complex than the conventional forms of realistic and idealistic writing can encompass, their new nature writing attempts to develop a more adequate means of (re-)describing the world, which is attentive to its intricate networks of interactions and interconnections. I suggest that while both “disenchantment” and “enchantment” are underwritten by binary divisions between subject and object, nature and culture, and human and nonhuman, Macfarlane and Oswald’s descriptions of an entangled world overcome this to offer a vision of a complex, interactive, and lively world—in other words, a newly *re-enchanted* world.

I begin by examining *Underland*, focusing on the preface to the text and then three key chapters that I consider to be emblematic of the book’s project as a whole. I first show that Macfarlane depicts the underland as a place not of deprivation and fear but of revelation. Then I track three key moves in Macfarlane’s depiction of an entangled world. First, he shows that the physical world is not inert (as disenchantment would have us believe), but rather active and lively, and is deeply connected to the worlds of human and nonhuman life. Second, drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and Bruno Latour, I suggest that Macfarlane makes visible the lively networks of interaction and exchange in the nonhuman world, while drawing analogies between this and our own human world. Third, Macfarlane extends the notion of entanglement to embroil humanity, plunging us into this vibrant and complex picture.

The second half of the chapter turns to Oswald’s *Dart*, which, still more radically than Macfarlane, employs the unique properties of poetry to dismiss divisions between subject and object, nature and culture. I begin by arguing that Oswald summons the river as a subject with agency, using sound to evoke the water’s unruly movement to the sea. As it flows along, the water muddies divisions between nature and culture, gathering voices which are both human and nonhuman. The world of the *Dart*, I argue, is co-constructed by humans and the landscape—though the river is the most active agent. I argue that this evokes a *naturalcultural* world, to borrow Donna Haraway’s concept. Having described this entangled world, the question still remains as to why this world should be understood as re-enchanted. So I close by arguing that Oswald’s *Dart* is not inhabited by gods or spirits, as “enchantment” might have it. Nor is it simply a natural resource, as per the “disenchanted” worldview. Dismissing these notions and their binary divisions allows Oswald the space to depict a world sustained by, in the words of Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da

Cunha, an “all-encompassing wetness”, and where—to borrow a line from the poem—it is “as if everything’s a kind of water”.⁶

Underland

My sense of nature feels differently reckoned too: further disturbed, further entangled.⁷

Underland is the fourth instalment in a series of travel narratives published by Robert Macfarlane. The earlier books—*Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (2003), *The Wild Places* (2007), and *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012)—describe the writer’s experiences of landscape. They explore the allure of high mountains on the imagination; the concepts of “the wild” and “wilderness”; and the link between walking, the imagination, and landscape. In *Underland*, the writer enters a different terrain by descending into the worlds beneath our feet. In so doing, he takes us into hidden spaces, unusual orders of time, and that which is invisible to our everyday, normal habits of perception.

Underland is divided into three “chambers”, each of which is focused on a specific region of the world (first Britain, then Europe, and finally The North) where Macfarlane will visit various specific sites. And each chamber is focussed on a different theme: “Seeing”, “Hiding”, and “Haunting” respectively. The preface to the “first chamber” of the book opens with a full-page reproduction of a photograph of “a hand stencil made in El Castillo cave in northern Spain”, one of a group the earliest of which is “at least 37,300 years old”, the work perhaps of “a Neanderthal artist”.⁸ *The Old Ways* opened with an image of footprints in snow leading away from the camera lens, which drew attention to that book’s concern with the experience of walking.⁹ In contrast, Macfarlane writes in *Underland* that “[i]f the image at the centre of much that I have written before is that of the walker’s placed and lifted foot, the image at the heart of these pages is that of the open hand, extended in greeting, compassion or the making of a mark”.¹⁰ And he continues:

I imagine laying my own palm precisely against the outline left by those unknown makers.
I imagine, too, feeling a warm hand pressing through from within the cold rock, meeting mine fingertip to fingertip in open-handed encounter across time.¹¹

⁶ Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha, “Wetness is Everywhere; Why Do We See Water Somewhere?”, in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 192. Oswald, *Dart*, 34

⁷ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), 81.

⁸ *Ibid*, 466-7.

⁹ Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* (London: Penguin, 2012), 4.

¹⁰ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 18.

This image of the millennia-old handprint, placed so close to the beginning of *Underland*, frames the text as an intimate encounter with the earth's underlands and its deep orders of time, but it also signals Macfarlane's focus on the notion of *entanglement*. The outstretched hand is a tactile and embodied gesture of touch. Judith Butler writes that Merleau-Ponty's thought concerning "the flesh" and touch came to show that we are enfolded with the world and other humans.¹² As Thomas Baldwin writes, Merleau-Ponty's account of the experience of the touch of one of our hands with the other troubles any clear division between subject and object, for when we hold our hands together our body is both.¹³ In *Underland*, the stenciled-hand foreshadows that the book will explore the entangled relations between humanity and the nonhuman world, in which we are both subject and object. The concept of entanglement, as I use it, overcomes distinctions between subject and object, and instead posits the fundamental interdependence and inter-involvement of human and nonhuman. In what follows, I suggest that for Macfarlane to recognise the human and nonhuman world as entangled is already to begin to re-enchant the world.

The printed image of the hand faces the first of *Underland's* printed pages, which opens with a stand-alone line: "The way into the underland is through the riven trunk of an old ash tree". This statement begins a short preface that opens the "first chamber" of *Underland*. In contrast to other literary works by Macfarlane, which are narrated in the first person, in these opening pages the first-person pronoun is not used, with the result that the narrator appears as an anonymous and to that extent mysterious authority. He/she speaks in the present tense, creating the impression of an event unfolding before our eyes—an effect heightened by prose that evokes a vivid scene:

"[l]ate summer heatwave, heavy air. Bees browsing drowsy over meadow grass. Gold of standing corn, green of fresh hay-rows... [a] child drops stones one by one into a metal bucket, *ting, ting, ting*".¹⁴

In this landscape the narrator leads us "along a stream to a thicketed dip from which grows the ancient ash. Its crown flourishes skywards into weather. Its long boughs lean low around. Its roots reach far underground". Here too Macfarlane vividly evokes the scene, using rhyme ("low around/ underground") and alliteration ("long... lean low", "ancient ash"), before taking us to the opening that leads down into the underworld: "[f]ollow a path through fields ... Over a stile in a limestone wall ... Down between roots to a passage of stone that deepens steeply into the earth". Macfarlane then remarks that, in the underland, time and space operate according to different, unusual laws:

¹² Judith Butler, "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche", in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 181.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 247.

¹⁴ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 3.

“[s]pace is behaving strangely—and so too is time. Time moves differently here in the underland. It thickens, pools, flows, rushes, slows.”¹⁵

This journey in the preface, from the actual world to a visionary one, which is so richly and carefully illustrated, can be read as an allegory of *Underland* as a whole. That is, this first journey into the underground, made by the anonymous narrator, symbolises to some extent all of the journeys that Macfarlane will take over the course of the rest of the book. The preface’s role as allegory becomes still more overt when the passage of stone takes the narrator to a mysterious chamber, the walls of which

appear bare at first, but then something extraordinary happens. Scenes from the underland start to show themselves on the stone, distant from one another in history, but joined by echoes.¹⁶

These scenes, despite being widely distributed across time and space, seem present to the narrator. He/she tells of ancient burials (a young woman in northern Europe, another in Egypt); hidden treasures (coins, a time capsule); toxic waste buried deep underground; and the wealth yielded by a gold mine worked by men whose lives are seen as disposable by corporations and the market. The scenes, we are told, correspond to the three major “tasks” connected to the underland: “to shelter what is precious, to yield what is valuable, and to dispose of what is harmful”. Thus this preface, and its description of the journey into the cavern with the many extraordinary images and echoes, serves to disclose these three “tasks” which, in addition to the text’s division into three “chambers” and their three respective themes (seeing, hiding, and haunting), recur throughout the book and structure its narrative.

This allegorical preface recalls Plato’s famous “allegory of the cave”, although Macfarlane *reverses* the story told by the philosopher and the meaning he ascribes to it. In Plato’s allegory people are trapped in a cave within which all they can see are shadows that, having never seen anything else, they take for reality.¹⁷ This is a story about knowledge, which teaches that human perception is flawed and also that, beyond the false world revealed by our senses, there is a perfect, imperceptible, unchanging realm of “Forms” that is the real world. To ascend from the darkness of the cave to the world bathed in light is an allegory of our first, hesitant steps from illusion to reality, from ignorance to knowledge, and to an understanding of humanity’s place in the cosmos.

In Macfarlane’s recasting of this allegory, the narrator/reader willingly descends into the cave rather than stepping out of it, where s/he finds shadows that, unlike those in Plato’s cave, are not associated with ignorance, foul-play, delusion, or imprisonment. The distance dividing Macfarlane’s allegory of the cave from Plato’s is made explicit in *Underland*’s first chapter entitled

¹⁵ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2015), 247-283.

“Descending”. Here the former’s narrative voice, indicated by the first-person pronoun, returns to tell us that “[w]e know so little” not of the world above, as Plato would have it, but “of the world beneath our feet”; that a descent into the underworld—known as *katabasis* or *nekyia* in classical myth—is one of the oldest of literary conventions; and also that this underground space is often imagined as mysterious, dangerous, or home to another world.¹⁸ The key points, however, are “paradoxical”, namely that “darkness might be a medium of vision, and that descent may be a movement towards revelation rather than deprivation”.¹⁹ Consequently, the writer describes “*Underland* [as] a story of journeys into darkness, and of descents made in search of knowledge”. Where Plato claims that one must rise up *out* of the cave in order to find true knowledge, Macfarlane suggests that we can learn much more by *descending* into it. In the following pages of this section, I track three of these descents and the knowledge that comes from them. I argue that what Macfarlane finds in the underland is a growing sense of the entanglement of the world, and that this underpins the notion of re-enchantment in the book.

The first move in Macfarlane’s construction of an “entangled”, re-enchanted world begins in the first journey as told in the first chapter. Here the writer challenges the notion, commonly understood as a feature of a disenchanted world, that the earth is inert, dull and separate from our own human world. This chapter, entitled “Burial”, describes the first of his journeys into the underworld—in this case a descent, accompanied by a friend, into Somerset’s limestone caves. Limestone is soluble and therefore easily shaped by rain and water. For Macfarlane, this helps us see that, rather than being inert and brute, limestone in particular (and rock in general) is mutable and animate:

We tend to imagine stone as inert matter, obdurate in its fixity. But here in the rift it feels instead like a liquid briefly paused in its flow. Seen in deep time, stone folds as strata, gouts as lava, floats as plates, shifts as shingle. Over aeons, rock absorbs, transforms, levitates from seabed to summit.²⁰

In these sentences, Macfarlane is not describing what he sees through the lens of everyday perception—instead, in order to describe the liveliness of rock in deep time, he is forced to use words not normally associated with that element. In particular, he describes the stone with verbs not usually associated with it: “folds”, “gouts”, “floats”, “shifts”, “absorbs”, “transforms”, even “levitates”. In so doing, Macfarlane contests the conventional association of stone with stasis, challenging us to imagine the movement of rock over time scales that stretch far beyond human history and therefore beyond direct human perception, and which therefore requires the use of our imaginations to grasp it. This imaginative vision allows us to see what is not visible to normal

¹⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

perception. He emphasises tactility (“[the stone] *feels*... like a liquid”) and vision (“seen in deep time”); but this is not our usual sense of touch or sight. This is sight “in deep time” and a touch attentive to signs of the rock’s movement over millennia. Down here “in the rift”, then, away from the surface world to which we are accustomed, Macfarlane’s writing pushes readers to “imagine” and therefore see and feel stone in a way utterly different from the everyday. Moreover, the writer looks to subvert the idea that the worlds of earth and minerals are lifeless and separate from the worlds of humans, animals and plants. He writes that “down here [in the cave] the boundaries between life and not-life are less clear”.²¹ According to Macfarlane, this is because

[L]imestone is usually formed of the compressed bodies of marine organisms ... that died in waters of ancient seas ... [I]n this way limestone can be seen as merely one phase in a dynamic earth cycle, whereby mineral becomes animal becomes rock; rock that will in time—in deep time—eventually supply the calcium carbonate out of which new organisms will build their bodies”.²²

When he emerges from the limestone caves, Macfarlane’s sense of the world is transformed—he writes that “[e]verything is shiveringly strange”.²³ This encounter with the limestone landscape, then, begins the process by which Macfarlane’s sense of “nature” becomes, as the epigram at the beginning of this section says, “further disturbed, further entangled”. Thus by descending deep underground, Macfarlane discloses an understanding of the earth which is active, mutable, and deeply intertwined with life on the surface.

As Simon Schaffer has pointed out, images of a “living Earth” are not new. They are a key component of the early notions of an enchanted world, but were also a part of early-modern astronomy and natural science, which arguably paved the way for the emergence of the narrative of disenchantment.²⁴ What is different about the liveliness described by Macfarlane here is that the earth is not animate in a naively enchanted way, nor is it a mechanistic view of the world. Macfarlane’s earth is inextricably entangled with life, but not imbued with its own spirit. For Macfarlane, the earth is not a large organism, but what he shows is that life and nonlife are made from the same matter. This is much the same point made by Sébastien Dutreuil when he remarks that the idea of “Gaia” does not mean that the “interconnected whole of the oceans, the Earth’s surface, and the atmosphere *is* alive... but that it is a *part* of Life” insofar as it supports life systems and participates in the cycle of life.²⁵

²¹ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 37.

²² *Ibid*, 32.

²³ *Ibid*, 51.

²⁴ Simon Schaffer, “On the Difficulty of Animating the Earth”, in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 292.

²⁵ Sébastien Dutreuil, “Gaia is Alive”, in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 181-182.

The second move in the account of entanglement that emerges from the limestone caves comes in a chapter entitled “The Understorey”. In this chapter of the book, Macfarlane explores the “Wood Wide Web”—an “underground social network” of fungi, which joins trees and plants to each other and through which they exchange and share nutrients, energy and signals. In Epping Forest, just outside London’s city limits, Macfarlane meets a young plant scientist and author named Merlin Sheldrake—“Truly, that is his name”, Macfarlane tells us.²⁶ The name Merlin, of course, recalls the wizard from Arthurian legend, who was associated with “the earth ... caverns, grottoes and fountains” and, in some versions of his story, was imprisoned underground in a Cave by Nenyve or Vivian.²⁷ The young botanist’s name helps Macfarlane imbue this chapter with a sense of magic or enchantment. He writes, for example, that Merlin “conjures open the underland of Epping Forest” and that this “reshapes my sense of the world in ways that I am still processing”.²⁸

So far, I have explored a number of these “openings” to hidden worlds found in *Underland*: the opening to the book itself, but also to chambers (both literal and metaphorical) and caves that have led to things usually hidden and invisible. In “The Understorey” Merlin “conjures open” the ground beneath our feet to reveal the complex entanglements and agencies of the nonhuman world. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Jane Bennett describes the habit of “parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” as a “partition of the sensible”, which renders the nonhuman world almost invisible to us.²⁹ As Rancière argues in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, aesthetics “is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise”, which ensures that it is closely involved with politics, which “revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it”.³⁰ The third chapter of this thesis is concerned with what a politics of entanglement might look like, but here I would like to emphasize that Macfarlane’s writing practice, to borrow Rancière’s words, is an attempt to intervene in the “distribution of the sensible” and the regime governing the “visible and the invisible”.³¹ By this I mean that Macfarlane makes visible the liveliness, complexity and agency of the underland fungal world and thereby strengthens the case *against* the disenchanting notion that the world is inert.

Macfarlane intervenes in the “distribution of the sensible” by revealing the complexity of the nonhuman world, which is normally invisible to human perception. Macfarlane writes: “I am reminded once more of how resistant the underland remains to our usual forms of seeing ... Just a few inches of soil is enough to keep startling secrets, hold astonishing cargo”.³² Most obviously,

²⁶ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 91.

²⁷ Peter H. Goodrich, “Introduction”, *Merlin: A Casebook* eds. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13, 41.

²⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 93.

²⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Materialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii, 105.

³⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

³¹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.

³² Macfarlane, *Underland*, 100.

his word choice here (“startling secrets ... astonishing cargo”) conjures a sense of marvel and wonder. He explains that millions of invisible fungal threads connect plants, trees, and soil and that, although discovered only recently, these connections have existed for millions of years. The fungal network’s mode of activity can be understood as analogous to Bruno Latour’s account of the dynamics of a “network”, which, he writes, “points to a transformation in the way action is located and allocated. What was invisible becomes visible, what had seemed self-contained is now widely redistributed”.³³ Indeed in the chapter we are considering, Macfarlane describes the forest’s different elements (trees, plants, fungi) as deeply entangled in a network of shared nutrients and signals. Fungi, he writes, ruin our notions of individuality, for “[f]ungi thwart our usual senses of what is whole and singular, of what defines an organism”.³⁴

Macfarlane closes the chapter by drawing a parallel between these nonhuman networks and our own human networks. This is explored by describing what happens when a group of Macfarlane’s and Merlin’s friends meet on a hill in the middle of the forest, drawn together “by social network, by text, by phone”. Once the group has gathered, a fire is started, and a mundane but nevertheless enchanted world comes into being:

The fire works its magic of storytelling and conviviality. People talk, re-establish existing connections, make new ones, bring into being a temporary community in that fire-braced forest space.³⁵

The emphasis here on making and re-making “connections”, along with the earlier mention of a “social network”, draws a broad parallel between this human gathering and the connections made and re-made, in the nonhuman world, between fungi, plants and trees. Macfarlane, I think, is trying to show that despite the obvious differences between human worlds and those inhabited by fungi, both rely on connection, interaction, and interdependence. His use of the present tense, alliteration and near rhyme (“fire-braced forest space”), heightens further the sense of enchantment. All these details combine to conjure a living world of which both human and non-human networks are active parts: “Drums, songs, stories. The trees shifting, speaking, busy making meaning that I cannot hear. Fungi writhing in the birch logs, in the soil.”

I do not want to overstate the connections Macfarlane makes between the human world and the world of fungi, for he continues to insist that the fungal world is radically different from our own and is in many ways incomprehensible from our human perspective. Nevertheless, in a study of the efforts of marine biologists to preserve threatened species of coral at the Horniman Museum in London, Sonia Levy takes a different approach. She describes coral, much like a fungi,

³³ Bruno Latour, “Networks, Societies, Spheres: Reflections of Actor-Network Theorist,” *International Journal of Communication* 5, no. 1 (2011), 797-798.

³⁴ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 102.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 115.

as entangled and intricate “multispecies and multiscale ecological units”.³⁶ But she also represents the biologists and the fungi they study in the museum as entangled and connected with each other. Inside the museum, “[t]he scientists and the corals are entangled in sharing a space for working, living, and world-making ... [here] a network of humans, nonhumans, life forms, and technologies coalesce to form this critical practice of care.”³⁷

In the third and final phase of my account of entanglement in *Underland*, I want to explore a chapter in which Macfarlane extends the depictions of entanglement described above by evoking the strange, deep orders of time, stretching into the deep past and future, with which the human world is entangled. I began this discussion of *Underland* (as the book itself begins) with the painted image of the hand-stencil. Here I will close the discussion by examining “Red Dancers”, the chapter in which he returns to this image, which describes Macfarlane’s expedition to the Lofoten archipelago on Norway’s western coastline. There, in remote sea caves, one can find pre-historic cave paintings depicting human figures in red iron-oxide pigment that appear to be dancing or jumping. In order to reach the cave Macfarlane must complete an arduous journey through the remote and harsh Lofoten landscape, which he presents as a journey into the past. Drawing on ancient Celtic Christian tradition, he describes this landscape as a “thin place”—a site “where the borders between worlds or epochs feel at their most fragile”.³⁸

A key moment in the chapter occurs when, as he moves through the landscape, Macfarlane glimpses a sea-eagle circling above him, and for a moment is overcome by a spark of joy:

I lie on my back ... and there above me, showing through the mist, is a sea-eagle, low and circling, and the queasy fear in my throat is forgotten and my heart leaps to be overflowed by that remarkable bird in that remarkable place. Then I think, *It’s just sizing you up as lunch*—and I laugh out loud at my stupidity and the land’s indifference.³⁹

The first phase of this encounter can be classed as an instance of “naïve enchantment”. First, there is a clear division between the viewing subject (Macfarlane lying on his back, looking upwards) and the viewed-object (the eagle, circling above). When viewed in this way, the eagle is objectified and becomes a spectacle for the writer; or as Lubkowitz would say, the eagle is an object of “Disneyfication”. The focus of the encounter is the wondrous effect of the eagle on the writer and as such leaves no room for any more complex exchange between self and a non-human other. Significantly, the phrase “my heart leaps” recalls Wordsworth’s poem “My Heart Leaps Up”, in which the poet writes: “My heart leaps up when I behold/ A Rainbow in the sky: / So was it when

³⁶ Sonia Levy, “For the Love of Corals: Life in the Ruins of the Museum,” in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 32.

³⁷ Levy “For the Love of Corals,” 34.

³⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 270-271.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 263.

my life began; / So is it now I am a man ...”⁴⁰ Wordsworth’s poem can be understood as emblematic of romantic notions of enchantment, but here, in the second of the sentences quoted above, Macfarlane quickly dismisses his wonder and these ideas as mistaken. Indeed, he chides himself for interpreting this situation in a way that places himself at its centre, noting the land’s indifference to him and the eagle’s interest in him only as food. His moment of naïve enchantment, it seems, prevented him from seeing what was in front of him.

As he finally approaches and then descends into the cave, Macfarlane observes that the underland is home to strange orders of time: “The cave is a slip-rift, an entrance to darkness where time shifts, pauses, folds”.⁴¹ In geology, a “rift” is a fissure in the earth, while a “strike-slip rift” refers to a particular mode of “rifting” to do with continental activity.⁴² But here the “slip-rift” seems to indicate that by entering this fissure in the earth, the writer is entering, without consciously intending to do so, a space between worlds and times—a “thin place”, as Macfarlane remarked earlier, where he comes into contact with deep geological time and the history of early humans. The “slip-rift” brings into proximity layers of strata from different geological periods, for it is a point of connection between the rocky landscape outside, weathered by today’s surface movement and storms, and the settled deep earth which preserves the painted figures. The cave also brings into contact different historical periods from human time, for as Izzy Wisher writes, “cave art remains fixed in place, undisturbed, in exquisite time capsules of human behaviour”.⁴³

Macfarlane evokes his descent into the cave as follows: “[q]uick clicks of water falling, drops curving silver to the eye from the granite far above... A prickling in the shoulders as I cross the threshold”.⁴⁴ The language here appeals to sound (the rhyme of “quick clicks”), sight (“silver to the eye”) and to the body (“a prickling in the shoulders”). The “prickling”, moreover, invests the description with a sense of foreboding. This could be a primal reaction in the body to this possibly dangerous space. Or this word may have been chosen by Macfarlane to evoke the almost supernatural sense of the powerful geological forces that have created this space, recalling the beginning of *Macbeth*: “by the pricking of my thumbs/ Something wicked this way comes”.⁴⁵

Some time after entering the cave, Macfarlane describes the moment when he first glimpses the figures:

Their red is rough at its edges, fading back into the rock that made it, blurred by water and condensation, and all of these circumstances—the blur, the low light, my exhaustion, my

⁴⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth Series: Volume 1*, ed. Jared Curtis (Humanities-Ebooks, LLP), 669.

⁴¹ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 277.

⁴² Friedemann Mattern et al., “Continental strike-slip rifts and their stratigraphic signature: application to the Bangong/Nujiang zone (Tibet) and the South Penninic zone (Alps)”, *Geol Rundsch* 87, no. 1 (1998): 206–224, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1007/s005310050203>.

⁴³ Izzy Wisher, “Cave Art”, *Aeon*, 11 December, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/ice-age-art-making-was-a-tactile-joyous-exploration-of-the-world>.

⁴⁴ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 277.

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 54.

blinks—are what give the figures their life, make them shift shapes on this volatile canvas in which shadow and water and rock and fatigue are all artists together.⁴⁶

This passage suggests a deeply *ecological* understanding of aesthetic experience, with Macfarlane describing the interactions between art, subjectivity, and the materiality of the physical world that together create his experience.⁴⁷

The red dancing figures playing across the cave-wall recall the cave-space at the beginning of *Underland*. They also bring to mind Plato’s allegory of the cave; but in contrast to the ancient philosopher’s allegory, Macfarlane is *not* suggesting that what he sees in the cave is an illusion. Macfarlane’s description of the scene highlights the interactions between observer, environment, and art: “[t]he dangers of the journey to reach the dancers ebb from me, the joy of their movement ebbs into me and I cry there, surprised and helpless, deep in granite and darkness . . .”⁴⁸ Unlike the naïve moment of enchantment with the eagle, here there is no distance between Macfarlane and the world; rather, the use of “ebb from me . . . ebbs into me” shows that he is implicated in this moment and embedded with the world around him. But although this demonstrates his distance from the atemporal truth valorised by Plato, it reveals to him a different kind of truth, one that offers him a glimpse of the deep past and of those humans who came before him to the cave to make and see this art: “What did I see in the dark? A shadow play of pasts, events refusing sequence . . .”⁴⁹

As argued in the preceding pages, in *Underland* Macfarlane depicts the earth as vibrant and flowing rather than inert, with each part of the non-human world entangled with the others. Here in his experience of the “Red Dancers”, the present of the human world is shown as entangled with the vast expanse of human history, which in turn is a thread entangled with the much longer time and wider expanse of the earth’s history. It is not easy to see the deep interactions between all things, in part because, as Bruno Latour remarks, the modern world to which we belong takes for granted the gap between self and others, particular non-human others. But when we do, Latour goes on to say, it is “truly amazing”.⁵⁰ The world is, one might say, re-enchanted. Before exploring this in more detail, it is helpful to broaden our discussion by turn to an even more radical vision of the human subject and its place in the world: Alice Oswald’s *Dart*.

⁴⁶ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 278.

⁴⁷ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8-9.

⁴⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 278-279.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 284.

⁵⁰ Latour, “Networks, Societies, Spheres”, 802.

Dart, from source to sea

This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy, | all names, all voices, Slip-Shape ...

Alice Oswald, *Dart*.⁵¹

The publication in 2002 of *Dart* marked a new direction for Oswald, who had previously composed what she calls “strict” poems in the form of sonnets and lyrics.⁵² These early poems, such as those collected in her first volume of poetry, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996), suggested nothing of the formal experimentation and technical innovation of *Dart*. As the title suggests, *Dart* is about the river Dart in her home county of Devon, which flows from its source on Dartmoor to the sea at Dartmouth. Oswald's poem follows the river's path all the way from its beginning as a “secret buried in reeds” to the moment when it releases itself into “the wings of the sea”.⁵³ Rather than adopting a fixed metrical form, the poem includes many different rhythms, which give a sense of the flow of the river's water through different surroundings. The water is Oswald's subject, flowing from source to sea, with the poem's changes of rhythm creating the impression that it is the constant, effluents energy of the poem. As we read, it feels as if each of the human subjects we encounter is constituted by the water and, still more radically, that all the material forms glimpsed in the poem are but transitory constellations of swirling water. Although he is mentioned only at the end of the poem, its presiding spirit is Proteus, the sea-god from classical myth who could assume different shapes at will.⁵⁴

What is truly unique about *Dart* is the extent to which it is polyvocal: the poem gathers, intertwines and slips between a plurality of different voices and selves which are both human and nonhuman—though the main actor throughout the poem is the water. In *Dart* Oswald depicts a world in which water is not just a “natural resource”, but is an unruly, metamorphic, and “slip-shape” force which makes fluid the boundaries between subjects and objects, moves the world, and generates all life.

It is helpful to see *Dart* against the backdrop provided by a community conservation project called “Confluence”, organised by the Dorset based charity Common Ground. “Confluence”, which focussed on the river Stour in Dorset, ran from 1997 to 2000. During these years, roughly forty events were organised that celebrated the river's local history, folklore, and the language and culture of the people who lived along it. Oswald contributed two river poems to an anthology of poetry published in 2000 as part of the “Confluence” project, titled *The River's Voice*, edited by Angela King and Susan Clifford, who along with Roger Deakin were the founding

⁵¹ Oswald, *Dart*, 1.

⁵² Hugh Haughton, “Water Worlds”, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 24, 2013, Issue 5747, 15.

⁵³ Oswald, *Dart*, 1, 47.

⁵⁴ “Proteus”, in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. Margaret Howatson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

members of Common Ground.⁵⁵ Although *Dart* itself is not explicitly connected to “Confluence,” the work of Common Ground and the activities of the “Confluence” project are clearly important parts of the historical context in which the poem was composed.⁵⁶ Moreover, through the work of Common Ground we find a creative link in a larger network of environmental thinking that connects Alice Oswald and Robert Macfarlane. Roger Deakin’s *Waterlog* (1999), an influential early touchstone of the new nature writing, described Deakin’s explorations of Britain through wild swimming. On the one hand, Deakin was a close friend of Robert Macfarlane and features in several of his books. On the other hand, scholars have argued for his formative influence on Oswald.⁵⁷ Roger Deakin thus suggests the close creative connections, albeit probably at one remove, between these two practitioners of the new nature writing.

Oswald composed the poem over the course of two years, through conversations with people who live and work on the Dart. As the poem flows towards Dartmouth, the narrative gathers these voices, slipping from one to another. The shift from one voice to another is marked in the margins, but often the change is fluid and the boundary between one voice and the next not clearly marked, so that their entanglement with each other and with the river whose movements these voices express, results in a polyvocal sound-map of the river. In Oswald’s words:

This poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. Over the past two years I’ve been recording conversations with people who know the river. I’ve used these records as life-models from which to sketch out a series of characters—linking their voices into a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea. There are indications in the margin where one voices changes into another. These do not refer to real people or even fixed fiction. All voices should be read as the river’s mutterings.⁵⁸

Here it is worth noting the use of the terms “sound-map” and “songline”. The latter refers, of course, to Aboriginal Australian “Songlines”, which were popularised by English travel writer Bruce Chatwin in his sometimes criticised but nonetheless influential book *Songlines* (1987). According to the Aboriginal-led group *Common Ground* (not to be confused with the Dorset based charity mentioned above), the Songlines “explain the laws by which people have lived, and the origins of Country”, while also tracing “astronomy and geographical elements in ancient stories that have helped shape the landscape”.⁵⁹ By describing *Dart* as a “sound-map” and “songline”, Oswald flags to readers that her poem will fashion an alternative vision of space, place and landscape, radically different from what her (most likely British) readers will be accustomed to.

⁵⁵ Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 43- 55.

⁵⁶ Haughton, “Water Worlds”.

⁵⁷ Thacker, “The Thing in the Gap-Stone Style”, 104, 112.

⁵⁸ Oswald, “Foreword,” in *Dart*.

⁵⁹ “Songlines”, *Common Ground* [Songlines \(commonground.org.au\)](http://songlines.commonground.org.au).

Indeed, as we shall see, Oswald's representation of the Dart is linked both to the river's movement in time and space and to its human stories.

This section argues that Oswald's *Dart*, like *Underland* (though the latter is clearly in literary style and genre very different from the former), sets itself apart from both the "disenchanted" and naively enchanted ways of "seeing" the world, in order to open a space in which a new kind of enchantment can be constructed. Oswald has long expressed her distrust of idealism in literature, which she seems to associate with traditional Romantic notions of enchantment, such as those expressed in Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up", touched on above.⁶⁰ In the introduction to her edited volume *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, Oswald writes that she chose "[n]o prospects, pastorals or nostalgic poems ... no poem that mistakes [the physical environment] for a mere conceit".⁶¹ Further, she warns that "[t]he knack of enervating nature (which starts in literature and quickly spreads to everything we touch) is an obstacle to ecology".⁶² In *Dart* Oswald subverts the "disenchanted" view of the natural world as inert and separate from human culture, while also attempting to wean us from binary divisions such as subject/object and idealism/realism. The poet summons the river as a subject with agency and looks for a language adequate to convey its deep entanglement with the human world that depends on it. She uses rhythm and sound to evoke the water's movement from "source to sea"; this is the story of the river's own life, from birth to dissolution, but also a map of river's interactions with the world around. In this poem, the divisions between "nature" and "culture" are muddied by the flow of the water, which spills its banks and flows into the memories, language and bodies of its human neighbours. Oswald thus offers a vision of the world as a co-construction, built by human and nonhuman actors, with the river and the lives of those who live and work on it deeply entangled with each other.

Dart begins by asking, "Who's this moving alive over the moor?", a question that introduces a moment of uncertainty. What is the object of the speaker's gaze? But also, who is speaking? Is it the poet, the narrator, an animal, or someone else entirely? The answer to the former is fairly formulaic: an "old man" is walking along the banks of the river. The answer to the second is much more surprising: we are listening to the river's voice:

The Dart, lying low in darkness calls out Who is it?
trying to summon itself by speaking ...⁶³

These lines are an example of "apostrophe", the literary technique by which a poet turns to intentionally address someone or something. According to David Farrier, apostrophe can be understood as a poetic *clinamen* (or swerve) whereby the poet or speaker turns towards and attends

⁶⁰ Haughton, "Water Worlds".

⁶¹ Alice Oswald, *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber, 2005), x.

⁶² *Ibid.*, x.

⁶³ Oswald, *Dart*, 1.

to the nonhuman world, which “can provide frameworks for thinking about an intentional turn towards nonhuman life”.⁶⁴ For Farrier, the *clinamen* is the basis of the interconnection of life forms: “the swerve is the necessary turn or deviation that tangles life in knots”.⁶⁵ Here Oswald experiments with the limits of apostrophic address by making the river Dart the subject which turns to address the aged walker; the poet thus undermines our usual, familiar subject/object distinction.

Jonathan Culler writes that apostrophes directed towards impossible or extraordinary addressees are best understood as a kind of invocation.⁶⁶ Here, however, Oswald makes the Dart the “impossible” source of the apostrophe; and through this apostrophic address (or “by speaking”), the river “summon[s] itself” into existence. It is thus through poetic invocation that, in this poem, the Dart begins its restless, unruly movement from source to sea, building from a “secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound”.⁶⁷ This opening, then, begins to undermine the notion of “disenchantment”, whereby the subjective human self is divided from a non-human world (creatures and objects), which exists simply as a resource for human needs. Rather, *Dart* commences with the river interacting with the human world (the aged walker) and also, through apostrophe, summoning itself into existence.

By picturing the river as “summoning” itself into existence, Oswald is clearly not suggesting that the Dart’s existence is constituted solely through her own poetic imagination; this would suggest that the river requires human art or poetry to be brought into existence. In *Dart* water is turbulent and wilful—the river spills its banks, the current forms eddies and whirlpools, the waves brawl and battle—and the poet seeks to convey this agency and unruliness through the use of sound. This is a strategy that Oswald says she learnt from Ted Hughes’ skill to evoke the life of living things by way of sound. In her 2005 Ted Hughes Memorial lecture, Oswald said:

It was a new idea to me—that instead of describing something (which always involves a separation between you and the object) you could replay it alive in the form of sound. You could use poetry to reveal what it sounds like being outdoors: the overlapping of thousands of different noises: the rain’s rhythm, the wind’s rhythm in the leaves ...⁶⁸

It is indeed through sound that Oswald seeks to “replay alive” the Dart and narrow the gap between subject and object. At the beginning of the poem, before the river has gathered any great force, Oswald writes:

⁶⁴ David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 90-91. Farrier takes the figure of the *clinamen* from Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*.

⁶⁵ Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 90.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015), 188.

⁶⁷ Oswald, *Dart*, 1.

⁶⁸ Alice Oswald, “Wild Things”, *The Guardian*, Dec 3, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/03/poetry.tedhughes>.

and I find you in the reeds, a trickle coming out of a bank, a foal
 of a river
 one step-width water
 of linked stones
 trills in the stones
 glides in the trills
 eels in the glides
 in each eel a fingerwidth of sea⁶⁹

The first line, far longer than those that follow, seems to mime the slow, tentative emergence of this “foal of a river”, and this slow beginning is also mirrored by the experience of the reader, who is held in this line longer than in those that follow. Then, the poem evokes the water’s progression as it grows from little more than a “trickle” into a stream of “one step-width water”. The rhythm of the next few shorter lines, beginning from “of linked stones”, captures the way that from this point the water begins to speed up as it gathers momentum. The repetition of words (*stones, trills, glides*) evokes the babbling, rippling movement of shallow water over rocks. Each of these lines is made up of two stressed syllables (“trills... stones”, “glides... trills”, “eels... glides”) divided by two unstressed syllables (“in the”), suggesting the bobbing or rippling motion of the water. The repetition of these stressed words (*glides/glides, trills/trills*) heightens this sense of the quietly babbling water, while the gentler repetition of the unstressed syllables suggests the movement of the water between waves and over smooth surfaces. In the course of the poem as a whole, the poet uses sound to reflect the different speeds and movements of the river: sometimes the Dart rushes and roars, carrying and sweeping away creatures which “at the mercy of rush/ quiver to keep still always”; sometimes it moves quietly through moss and vegetation at its banks “under the spickety leaves/ under the knee-napped trees/ rustling in its cubby holes”; and sometimes the river ripples and bobbles over the stones on the river-bed.

Certainly, the poet uses sound-play to evoke the varying, lively movement of the river through the landscape. But just as importantly, sound works to overcome the separation between subject/object and nature/culture. In an exemplary passage, the river’s voice asks: “will you rustle quietly and listen to what I have to say ...”. Having thus caught our attention, it goes on to ask:

will you swim down and attend to this foundry for
 sounds
 this jabber of pidgin-river
 drilling these rhythmic cells and trails of scales,
 will you translate for me blunt blink glint.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Oswald, *Dart*, 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

A “pidgin” language contains linguistic features from “two or more languages ... used for communication between people not having a common language”.⁷¹ Here, I think, the “jabber of pidgin-river” refers back to the “foundry of sounds”—and so it refers to an entity and a voice that is made up of a network of interactions between words from numerous ‘languages’, of fish, stone, water, boat, and so on. Haughton notes, for instance, how here the “rhythmic cells” and “trails of scales” refer simultaneously to the world of fish and the human world of musical scores.⁷² In the passage quoted above, the river is quite explicitly asking us to “attend to” and “translate” its voice and sounds. This could be interpreted in part as a call to us as readers to attend carefully to the sounds of the world around us, but perhaps it could also be interpreted as a call *to the poet* to be a medium for the river. Seen in this light, the river is calling on the poet to translate its voice for the reader. A few lines later, the river speaks again, in order to pose another question:

the way I talk in my many-headed turbulence
among these modulations, this nimbus of words kept in
 motion
sing-calling something definitely human,
will somebody sing this riffle perfectly as the invisible river
sings it, quite different from this harsh primary
repertoire of murmurs, without any hardware
of stones and jointed sticks, one note
that rives apart the two worlds without any crossing...⁷³

In these lines, the river’s speech is described as turbulent and changeable (“turbulence ... modulations”), and also partially *human*, for the river is heard “sing-calling something definitely human”. It also seems to be *pleading* to be understood: “Will you listen ... Will somebody sing this riffle perfectly as the invisible river”.

It is worth noting the poet’s choice of “riffle”, which has a revealing double meaning: it can be used to signify both the restless movement of water and the act of quick reading. It can be “a stretch of (usually shallow) water in a river where the surface is agitated by its passage over rocks, sandbars, or other obstructions”; but it can also be understood as “a quick skim or browse; an act of leafing *through* pages of a book, papers, etc.”⁷⁴ It seems clear that the river is asking for a mode of singing/writing able to “sing this riffle perfectly as the invisible river sings it”, which would be a way of singing “quite different from this harsh primary | repertoire of murmurs”. Specifically, what the Dart seems to be calling for is a re-enchanted poetic language which would

⁷¹ "Pidgin, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online*, December 2020, Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com>.

⁷² Haughton, “Water Worlds”.

⁷³ Oswald, *Dart*, 15-16.

⁷⁴ "Riffle, n.," *OED Online*, December 2020, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com>.

serve as a “pidgin” tongue that might make visible the interconnections between human and nonhuman worlds. Drawing on our earlier discussion of Rancière, we can say that our network of interactions which makes up the river is hidden by our habitual, disenchanted “distribution of the sensible”, according to which we perceive there to be a fundamental gap between the regimes of nature and culture, human and nonhuman.

In the course of the poem, Oswald looks to convey the ways in which the world of *Dart* is made through the interaction and interconnection between the river and humans. The poet imagines the Dart flowing into the thoughts, memories and imaginations of its human subjects and flowing around, over and through their bodies. Conversely, we see that the human world shapes the Dart’s waters to our needs and desires. Thus the landscape of the Dart can be understood in terms of the entanglement of human and nonhuman realms. The interactions between human and nonhuman in *Dart* are so fluid that it is difficult to say where one regime ends and the other begins.

According to geographer and literary critic Peter Howarth, *Dart* imagines place through “the continual interaction of water and its setting with the language, needs, memories, and imagination of the human social world”.⁷⁵ This can be seen, for example, one-third of the way through the poem, when one voice, identified as belonging to the “swimmer”, says:

... I jumped in a rush of gold to the head,
through black and cold, red and cold, brown and warm,
giving water the weight and size of myself in order to
 imagine it,
water with my bones, water with my mouth and my
 understanding
when my body was in some way a wave to swim in.⁷⁶

In lines like these, Oswald unsettles the boundaries between human and nonhuman, and suggests that the world is co-made between herself/himself and the river: the swimmer gives some of his “weight and size” to the water and in turn becomes (in some way) a wave with the colours of the water suffusing his body. The passage continues:

[the swimmer] dives, he shuts himself in a deep soft-bottomed
 silence
which underwater is all nectarine, nacreous. He lifts

⁷⁵ Peter Howarth, “‘Water’s Soliloquy’: Soundscape and Environment in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*” in *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry*, eds. Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 190.

⁷⁶ Oswald, *Dart*, 22.

the lid and shuts and lifts the lid and shuts and the sky
jumps in and out of the world he loafs in.⁷⁷

Here the swimmer delves underwater, in effect into the water's "underland". Oswald describes the subsurface world with words that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, are obsolete: "nectarine", meaning "as sweet as nectar", and "nacreous", meaning iridescent, like mother-of-pearl.⁷⁸ This portrays the underwater world as an ancient place of otherworldly luminescence. Despite this difference between the world of air above the surface of the water and the world below, we see the swimmer shuttling ("lifts/ shuts/lifts/jumps in and out") between them. Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha have argued that we should see rivers not as well contained flows of water, but rather as "an all-encompassing wetness"; seen in this manner, a river "does not flow as water does, but rather soaks, blows, seeps, osmotes, and transpires its way to ever-extending holdings of wetness, holdings that eventually become the ocean that reconnects with the wind".⁷⁹ In the passage with the swimmer, we see that Oswald pictures a world in which human bodies and water overlap and cross over into each other as different intensities of "wetness" (the human body, after all, is 60% water, and our brains and hearts 73%).⁸⁰

We can develop this notion of "wetness" by utilising Donna Haraway's concept of *natureculture* (to which we will also return in the next chapter), which posits that, even though there is some use in distinguishing between "nature" and "culture", the terms are in reality inseparable from each other.⁸¹ The *naturalcultural* status of the river points towards the tension between the Dart as a wild, material entity and as a natural resource. The Dart is sometimes a mysterious and natural being. At its most raw, there is "the real Dart", which "writhes like a black fire, smelling of fish and soil".⁸² But it is also a material resource that drives the wool mill and provides the energy used to churn the milk; and it is a place of recreation for the fishermen, swimmers and canoeists. It is polluted by oil, soap and plastics and it is home to quicksilver fish and seals. The Dart is at once natural and cultural, and while these two aspects can be distinguished, they cannot be divided from each other. The watery world of *Dart* thus creates a picture in which, to borrow the words of feminist theorist Astrida Neimanis, "there is no border where water ends and culture begins ... where natural forces rule and humans submit *or* where human culture rules and nature submits. Water is eminently naturalcultural".⁸³

⁷⁷ Oswald, *Dart*, 23.

⁷⁸ "Nectarine, adj. and n.2.", "Nacre, n.", *OED Online*, September 2020, Oxford University Press <https://www.oed.com>.

⁷⁹ Mathur and da Cunha, "Wetness is Everywhere", 192.

⁸⁰ H.H Mitchell et al., "The Chemical Composition of the Adult Human Body and its Bearing on the Biochemistry of Growth", *The Journal of Biological Chemistry* 158, no. 3 (1945): 625-637.

⁸¹ Astrida Neimanis, "Alongside the Right to Water, a Posthumanist Feminist Imaginary", *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 5, no. 1, (2014): 15.

⁸² Oswald, *Dart*, 17.

⁸³ Neimanis, "Alongside the Right to Water", 15.

Indeed *Dart* anticipates, I would suggest, a recent turn by some feminist theorists, such as Neimanis and Stacy Alaimo, to see water as a vehicle for considering the interconnections between the human and the nonhuman and between nature and culture. Alaimo developed the concept of “transcorporeality” to account for the ways in which human subjectivity is always riven by the forces of economics, politics, culture, and the nonhuman world. For Alaimo, “[t]ranscorporeality is a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments”.⁸⁴ Oswald’s *Dart*, in my view, shows transcorporeality at work in the world. The river is shaped by forces and flows that are natural, material, political, scientific and economic. The river passes through the “Woollen Mills” at Buckfast, where the mill “add[s] a certain amount of detergent, non-ionic, reasonably biodegradable”, then through a dairy farm where the water is used to spin the milk (“processing, separating, blending” 600,000,000 gallons of milk a week). The *Dart* is also shaped by international fishing industries, with the fisherman saying: “there aren’t many more [salmon] these days. They get caught off/ Greenland in the monofilaments”.⁸⁵

So far, I have tracked the ways in which *Dart* envisions an entangled world of human and nonhuman interactions. It remains, however, to be said how this is “re-enchanted”. For this, we turn to the poem’s virtuosic closing passage which takes place in the sea-caves where the *Dart* meets the sea. The location of this final scene recalls the conclusion of Macfarlane’s *Underland* in the Lofoten sea-caves. Oswald begins the final movement of her poem with the voice of “the sealwatcher”, who says: “I steer my wave-ski into caves” and

Flick out the torch, the only thread between down
 here and daylight
 and count five while the sea suckles and settles.
 Self-maker, speaking its meaning over mine.
 At low water
 I swim up a dog-leg bend into the cliff,
 the tide slooshes me almost to the roof
 and float inwards into the trembling sphere
 of one freshwater drip drip drip
 where my name disappears and the sea slides in to
 replace it.
 There the musky fishy genital smell
 of things not yet actual: shivering impulses, shadows,

⁸⁴ Stacy Alaimo, “Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea”, in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indian University Press, 2014), 187.

⁸⁵ Oswald, *Dart*, 19, 29, 49.

propensities,
little amorous movements, quicksilver strainings and
restrainings...⁸⁶

Through sibilant sound-play (“the sea suckles and settles./ Self-maker, speaking its meaning over mine ... my name disappears and the sea slides in”), Oswald evokes the ceaseless murmuring of the ocean, which she pictures as the ultimate source of life. This is evident from the language of sexuality and reproduction. Here, Oswald describes the moment that the river completes its life journey from source (as a “secret buried in reeds”) to dissolution in the sea. All those selves and voices that it gathered in its journey from source to sea pour into the ocean, which as “self-maker”, “speak[s] its meaning over” those individual identities—in this case the seal-watcher, whose “name disappears and the sea slides in to replace it”. Clearly, however, from the language of reproduction described above, rather than a moment of death this is just another transformative moment in the life cycle of water, which, as Mathur and da Cunha argue, returns to the ocean and then to the wind.⁸⁷

The final stanzas of *Dart* echo its opening lines, in which the Dart sought to “summon itself by speaking” as it called out “Who is it?”. The poem ends as follows:

who’s this moving in the dark? Me.
This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy,
all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,
whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,
driving my many selves from cave to cave...⁸⁸

Oswald suggests here that the water is in effect Proteus, the classical sea-god possessing the ability to assume different shapes at will. However, as we have seen, Oswald’s vision of the world is not one governed by gods, such as in the “enchanted” worlds of the past. Nor is this world invested with a sense of enchantment or spirit as imagined by the Romantics. At the same time, Oswald dismisses the disenchanting view that water is simply a material resource for human use. Rather, I have shown that, like Macfarlane, Oswald depicts a world of entanglements between nature and culture. *Dart* offers us a glimpse of a world in which re-enchantment derives from a sense of the world as suffused by a ubiquitous “wetness” and by the generative power of water, which is “all names, all voices” and all “selves”, in which it is “as if everything’s a kind of water”.⁸⁹

Joshua Landy argues that “reflexivity” emerged as “the dominant literary mode” in the nineteenth century at the same time as people living through modernity experienced the “disenchantment of the world”. In fact, it could be argued that “disenchantment” is a product of

⁸⁶ Oswald, *Dart*, 48.

⁸⁷ Mathur and da Cunha, “Wetness is Everywhere”, 192.

⁸⁸ Oswald, *Dart*, 48.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

self-reflexivity because it reveals that what was once took to be real (a world of gods, spirits and supernatural forces) is in fact a delusion. As is often remarked, disenchantment underwrites the view tht the human self can stand apart from the non-human world, with the latter imagined as inert, lifeless and powerless. For Landy, reflexivity allows us to practise the skill of “*lucid self-delusion*... [or] the tenacious maintenance of fantasy in the face of the facts” in order to re-enchant the world.⁹⁰ However, this solution actually concedes that the world and our minds are disenchanted, and thus seems inadequate to “re-enchant” the world.

Instead, in this chapter I have argued that Macfarlane and Oswald, in *Underland* and *Dart* respectively, show that the story of disenchantment is an inadequate description of the world and *is itself* a fiction, while also repudiating naïve notions of enchantment. For these writers, enchantment / disenchantment is a binary division unable accurately represent the complexity of the world because it is based on misleading oppositions between subject and object, nature and culture, human and nonhuman. I have shown that by dismissing these notions and the binary oppositions that underpin them, Macfarlane and Oswald open a space in which the world can be redescribed, in ways that attend to its entangled networks of mutual interdependence. I have argued that this notion of entanglement underpins the process of re-enchantment. An entangled world is not animated by a Romantic or literary conceit, nor is it seen as an inert resource. It is instead, a lively world of interacting human and nonhuman forces.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to think that “re-enchantment” simply means re-investing the world with wonder. The enchanted worlds of the past prompted joy and wonder, but this was shadowed by the possibility of death and disaster. It is no different today, for to write about the “natural” world in the twenty-first century means writing about climate breakdown and environmental catastrophe. In chapter two, we therefore turn to Macfarlane and Oswald as they negotiate our entanglement with a world that includes the reality of climate change and the possibility of environmental catastrophe.

⁹⁰ Joshua Landy, “Modern Magic: Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and Stéphane Mallarmé,” in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, eds. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 129.

Chapter 2

What happens to re-enchantment in a world marked by climate breakdown and environmental disaster? In chapter one I argued that Macfarlane and Oswald, in *Underland* and *Dart* respectively, moved beyond the disenchanted view of nature as an inert, lifeless object disconnected from human subjects, in order to describe the world in ways more adequate to its vitality and complex entanglements. For them re-enchantment means foregrounding a world not of gods or spirits but of lively nonhuman agents held together by a wondrous network of relations and interactions. This is the re-enchanted world with which we are entangled. Further, these texts re-worked our understanding of the human subject, placing “the self” in symbiotic relation to nonhuman forces. However, to write about the nonhuman or “natural” world today necessarily means also writing about the climate crisis and environmental destruction. In this second chapter, I turn to two of the most recent texts by Oswald and Macfarlane that implicitly and explicitly engage with this question: the former’s *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (2011), a translation and transformation of Homer’s *Iliad*, and the latter’s *Ness* (2019), which the writer says is in part “a futile attempt to retell *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the Anthropocene”.¹

The *Iliad* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were composed and are set in a pre-modern “enchanted” world. Homer’s *Iliad* was probably composed between 725 and 675 BCE, and its subject is to some extent based on events that took place around 1250 BCE. In its imagined world, events are influenced by the power of the gods and spirits and by the whims of Fate; the city of Troy and the great Greek and Trojan heroes—Achilles and Hector—are subject to these superhuman forces. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was composed in the medieval period; it is imbued with a Christian moral code, while also describing a world of marvels and supernatural beings, including the Green Knight himself. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor describes the expanse of time before modernity as “enchanted”, by which he means that human life was understood to be a part of a world that included “spirits, demons and moral forces” and, further, that the self was thought to be “porous” and vulnerable to these nonhuman forces.² From the sixteenth-century, however, this “enchanted” world began gradually to be displaced by our “modern world” in which the self inhabits and yet is able to scrutinize from a distance a disenchanted world from which nonhuman forces have been banished to the realm of superstition.³

¹ Robert Macfarlane, “Should This Tree Have the Same Rights as You?” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/02/trees-have-rights-too-robert-macfarlane-on-the-new-laws-of-nature>.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

This chapter tracks the ways in which Oswald and Macfarlane delve into, reimagine, and make use of this “enchanted” past. Developing my account of “entanglement” from the previous chapter, I argue that *Memorial* and *Ness* demonstrate that a re-enchanted world is not just wondrous, nor is it necessarily harmonious—it can also be *dangerous* for us all. This is a primary consequence of the notion of entanglement, which shows the proximity to each other of human and nonhuman subjects and forces. Today, the notion that the powers of the earth can threaten humanity, acknowledged to varying degrees in ancient Greece and medieval Britain, is once again widely recognised. Beginning with a reading of *Memorial* and then moving onto *Ness*, I explore the language and story-form developed in these texts to suggest that they describe the fraught interactions between humanity and the nonhuman world, which was a hallmark of the “enchanted” past, and are now becoming an unavoidable feature of the modern world. The chapter concludes by developing an allegorical reading of these texts in the light of the literary theory of Walter Benjamin, for whom allegory can be understood as a form of re-enchancement. I suggest that for Oswald and Macfarlane, allegory in *Memorial* and *Ness* creates new meanings for the present from historical material. In these texts, remembering the “porous” world of the past allows us to see more clearly the entangled, fragile world of the present.

Memorial—“excavating” the *Iliad*

In her introduction to *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*, Oswald describes the poem as “a translation of the *Iliad*’s atmosphere, not its story”. It is an attempt to retrieve the *Iliad*’s “*enargeia*”, which she says translates approximately to “bright unbearable reality”.⁴ According to both ancient Greek and contemporary literary theory, *enargeia* describes that quality of a narrative which makes it so vivid to a reader or listener that they believe themselves to be present in the story.⁵ In the following discussion, I will also introduce a further understanding of the concept which sees it as an expression of entanglement. According to Bronislaw Szerszynski, who draws on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, *enargeia* is a term of action which shows that “most of what happens in the world does not involve a heroic agent imposing his or her active will on a passive environment, but is a collaboration, an interaction, that entangles the entity in its milieu”.⁶ I will suggest that in *Memorial* *enargeia* in the first sense—the ability to render something vividly—enables us to see *enargeia* in the second sense—the entanglement of human and nonhuman subjects and agencies. In order to translate the *Iliad*’s *enargeia*, Oswald removes almost seven-eighths of the poem and

⁴ Alice Oswald, *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 1.

⁵ Allan J. Rutger et al., “From *Enargeia* to Immersion: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Concept”, *Style* 51, no. 1 (2017), 36.

⁶ Bronislaw Szerszynski, “The Grammar of Action in the Critical Zone”, in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 346.

thus most of its narrative structure. *Memorial* is composed from what is left, primarily two elements: “biographies” of those who died in the Trojan war and translations of Homer’s similes, which evoke the forces of the natural world. Notably, the translations of the similes are in most cases printed twice, with the second placed immediately after the first.

Oswald’s decision to subtitle the text *An Excavation of the Iliad* is in part explained by the form of the poem, for it is as if she has chiseled away the epic burden of the original text in order to disclose what has been long buried beneath it. This latter meaning is revealing of Oswald’s approach to translation in *Memorial*; after all, “to translate” means not only to convert something into another language, but also to move something from one place and time to another. Translation is thus concerned both with preservation—in this case of an “atmosphere”—and with conversion to a new context.

In what follows, I argue that what Oswald’s *Memorial* tries to uncover from the past and bring vividly to her reader is the *Iliad*’s evocation of the “bright unbearable reality” of a catastrophe so extreme that it draws the natural world into its orbit. Oswald dismisses the details of Homer’s narrative to highlight the inter-implication of human and nonhuman forces in the poem. Indeed, Oswald has said in an interview that “I think the best nature poets are Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, because they include the human and the non-human in the same picture”.⁷ Like *Dart*, then, *Memorial* depicts a world where human and nonhuman forces are entangled with each other; but *Memorial* takes a further step by showing that the interdependence of the human and nonhuman worlds makes each vulnerable to the other.

This section of the chapter begins by arguing that Oswald depicts the interdependence and entanglement of the human and nonhuman worlds through the antiphonal relationship between the poem’s “biographies” and similes, in which these elements of the text respond to each other. *Memorial* takes as its starting point a world in which the regimes of culture (the biographies) and nature (evoked by the similes) are in harmony with each other. However, as I go on to argue, over the course of the poem the latter is depicted as increasingly unruly and potentially dangerous—the similes begin, in effect, to suggest an impending natural disaster. I show these natural forces spilling into the human world of *Memorial* by focusing on Oswald’s “translation” of Homer’s description of the river Scamander rising up to thwart the slaughter being wrought by Achilles. This leads me to the suggestion that in *Memorial* disaster is imminent because the natural world is provoked to respond to the unfolding human disaster of war. The work of memory in *Memorial*, I propose, is designed to bring humanity, in the words of Latour and Weibel, back “down to earth,”⁸ where we

⁷ Max Porter, “Interview with Alice Oswald,” *The White Review*, August, 2014, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-alice-oswald/>

⁸ Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, “Seven Objections Against Landing on Earth,” in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 13.

find that our past was, our present is, and our future will continue to be entangled with the fate of the nonhuman world.

In 1940 Simone Weil famously wrote that “[t]he true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away”. Written in the shadow of Nazi Germany’s invasion of France, Weil’s essay should be understood in part as reflecting on that most extreme and dehumanising of manifestations of violence. Force, says Weil, is that which “turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing”—and in the *Iliad* “the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to”.⁹

Recently, Weil’s account of “force” in the *Iliad* has been applied by scholars to the Anthropocene and the force of climate change. Wai Chee Dimock, for example, argues that classical tragedy, and in particular the *Iliad*, provides a language with which to consider abrupt and catastrophic events, whether nonhuman, such as tsunamis and cyclones, or human, such as those associated with the names Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Dresden. For Dimock, force obeys only physical laws and the moments of greatest catastrophe are when “the human world is assimilated, without apology and often without residue, into the combustible world of physics”.¹⁰ Brooke Holmes builds on Weil and Dimock’s claims, but argues that they both overstate the division between nonhuman force and human violence in the *Iliad*. According to Holmes, both Weil and Dimock miss the moment in the poem when the natural world becomes a key actor on the battlefield—when, in Book 21, the river Scamander, as an ally and protector of the Trojans, rises up to confront Achilles and thwart the slaughter he is leading.¹¹ In Holmes’ view, this episode can be illuminated by Donna Haraway’s concept of “naturecultures” (to which I referred in chapter one). This concept helps explain the ambiguous figure of Scamander, who is at once a “stubbornly non-human form, [of] chaotic and destructive power”, but also a god and “agent of care” of the Trojans.¹²

As Holmes remarks, much traditional scholarship of the *Iliad* notes that a division between the natural and human worlds seems to be inherent in the organisation of the poem, with the agency of the natural world largely contained in Homer’s famous extended similes. Nevertheless, as some recent scholarship has demonstrated, the forces of the natural world shape (albeit subtly) the *Iliad*’s narrative.¹³ By composing *Memorial*, in her words, as a “bipolar poem made of similes

⁹ Simone Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” *Chicago Review* 18, no. 2 (1965), 6.

¹⁰ Wai Chee Dimock, “After Troy: Homer, Euripides, Total War,” in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 73, 76.

¹¹ Brooke Holmes, “Situating Scamander: ‘Natureculture’ in the *Iliad*,” *Ramus* 44, no. 1&2 (2015): 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33, 51.

¹³ Alex C. Purves, “Wind and Time in Homeric Epic,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140, no. 2 (2010), 323.

and short biographies”, Oswald’s transformation of Homer’s poem seems to make this division between the human and natural worlds more pronounced.¹⁴ When scholars engage with this feature of the poem, they often read the similes as subordinate to the main action of the story. The natural forces re-presented by the similes are interpreted as either illustrative of the human world, as evoked by the “biographies”, or viewed as altogether unimportant. Hahnemann holds the former view, arguing that “Oswald consistently casts the world of nature portrayed in the similes in terms that evoke the world of human warriors”, while Peter Green expresses the latter: “[Oswald’s similes], for some inscrutable reason, are printed twice—are they really that important?”¹⁵ In contrast, Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff argue compellingly that Oswald deploys a form of “parataxis”, according to which the “biographies” and “similes” are held in a “balanced pattern of statement and response”.¹⁶ In the following pages, I argue that the similes are in fact key to understanding *Memorial*. First, the similes show the gentle pattern of call and response between humanity and the natural world, with the repetition of the similes evoking the cyclical rhythms of nature. Then, however, as the poem continues, Oswald chooses to repeat only some of the similes. This speeds up the pace of the poem as the exchanges between humans and nonhuman forces are shown to be increasingly volatile. And, finally, natural force, which until this point had been mostly contained within the similes, spills into the drama of the poem to thwart Achilles, that figure of untrammelled violence.

Memorial opens with an eight-page list of the names of the war-dead whose deaths will be recounted in the text, beginning with PROTESILAUS (all proper names are capitalised in Oswald’s poem) and ending with the Trojan hero HECTOR.¹⁷ This list brings to mind those often included in war-memorials. For Hahnemann and Schein, for example, it recalls the famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., designed by Maya Lin. Known as “The Wall”, it is made up of two walls that record the names of more than 58,000 of the dead or missing, listed according either to the date of their deaths or when they were last seen. As in *Memorial*, the names on “The Wall” are printed in capital letters and arranged vertically in order to memorialise each individual soldier lost in war. Homer’s *Iliad* is typically understood to be a poem about, on the one hand, great numbers of people (famously no less than a thousand ships sailed to attack Troy) and, on the other, individual heroes such as Achilles and Hector. This emphasis on the collective and heroic individual eclipses our awareness of the average foot soldier in the war. *Memorial*, however, while mentioning Homer’s heroes, arguably turns its attention more forcefully to those individuals

¹⁴ Oswald, *Memorial*, 1.

¹⁵ Carol Hahnemann, “Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 22, no. 1 (2014): 18; Peter Green, “Homer Now”, *The New Republic*, June 7, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/103920/homer-the-iliad-translations>.

¹⁶ Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff, “[M]emories and similes laid side by side’: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Connotations* 27 (2018), 23.

¹⁷ Oswald, *Memorial*, 12.

often overlooked in our understanding of the *Iliad*. Oswald's poem thus chronicles the deaths of a great number of soldiers while also focusing on each individual.

After this list of names comes the first obituary, which describes the death of Protesilaus. The poem tells us he was the first Greek to die "jumping to be the first ashore". His "biography" is followed by the first of Oswald's doubled similes, as follows:

Like a wind-murmur
Begins a rumour of waves
One long note getting louder
The water breathes a deep sigh
Like a land-ripple
When the west wind runs through a field
Wishing and searching
Nothing to be found
The corn-stalks shake their green heads

Like a wind-murmur
Begins a rumour of waves
One long note getting louder
The water breathes a deep sigh
Like a land-ripple
When the west wind runs through a field
Wishing and searching
Nothing to be found
The corn-stalks shake their green heads¹⁸

The word "like" introduces the simile. We expect this word to refer to and provide an illustration of the previous lines describing the death of the Greek soldier: "Protesilaus' death was like ...". But we quickly realise that the "like" is instead attached to the line that follows it: "[b]egins a rumour of waves". The simile's meaning becomes clear when one reads the passage in its own right, without recourse to the preceding obituary. This makes the "rumour of waves" the subject of the passage. The passage thus reads: "[A] rumour of waves begins like a wind murmur". Initially, then, there seems to be a rupture between the biography of Protesilaus and the simile which follows. The latter sense is reinforced by the fact that this passage is in fact Oswald's translation of a simile from Book 2 of the *Iliad*. In effect, the poet has transposed Homer's original simile into an entirely new context. The simile's original context had concerned Agamemnon rousing his

¹⁸ Oswald, *Memorial*, 14.

troops to sail to attack Troy. The passage evokes the gathering wind, the sound of the sea, and rustling corn:

So [Agamemnon] spoke, and roused the spirit in the breasts of all
that throng, none of whom had heard what was said in council.
The assembly was stirred into motion like the long sea rollers
of the Ikarian deep, which winds from the east or south
roil up, rushing on them from the clouds of Zeus, the Father.
As when the west wind's onset flurries the deep-standing
grain with its rough blast, and all the corn-ears bend,
so all the assembly was shifted, and with loud hullabaloo
men raced to the ships ...¹⁹

In Homer, the unruly ocean and wind-blown corn are illustrative of the power of Agamemnon's speech with which he inspires his troops. However, Agamemnon and the throng of soldiers are notably absent from Oswald's translation of this simile, and if we focus our attention on the simile this seems to create a separation between the human action of the poem and the natural forces of the simile world.

But a key effect of Oswald's decision to repeat the simile is that this forces us to re-read the passage and linger on its meaning; and on closer inspection we realise that the "biography" and the simile are intricately intertwined. Linne and Niederhoff have noted that the sense of something *beginning* links the biography and the simile: Protesilaus is the *first* to die, while the rumour of waves *begins* to stir the nonhuman forces in Oswald's poem.²⁰ Moreover, the natural world of the simile seems to respond with care and mourning for the Greek warrior who has died. The simile evokes a sense of melancholy—"the water breathes a deep sigh", the west wind goes "wishing and searching", and the "corn-stalks shake their green heads"—as if the natural world is lamenting the death of Protesilaus. We can therefore suggest a reading whereby the winds and waters respond with care, concern and lament for the loss of this first human life in this war. Rather than dividing *Memorial* into separate regimes of "nature" and "culture", then, Oswald's similes point to the entanglement and interaction between the human drama of the poem and the natural forces evoked by its similes.

The doubling of the similes is also directly linked to Oswald's stated attempt to translate the *Iliad's* quality of "enargeia". As noted earlier, enargeia is typically understood in literary theory as describing the quality of intense "vividness" or "clearness" of a story which makes a narrative seem present to the reader or listener.²¹ Bronislaw Szerszynski, however, offers a lesser known

¹⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 69-70.

²⁰ Linne and Niederhoff, "The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald's *Memorial*," 26.

²¹ Rutger et al., "From Enargeia to Immersion," 36.

understanding of “*enargeia*”, arguing that it is a term of action which describes the “dynamic coexistence of potential and actual” activities; these “are not merely a means to an end but themselves confer value on life”. For him, much of modern Western human society mistakenly conceives of action in a manner that valorises achievement and conquest. By contrast, according to Szerszynski, *enargeia* is best illuminated by attending to the agency of plants: “[f]or plants ... nourishment, growth, and activity are continuous and potentially infinite ... and the plant in its endless repetition of leaf and leaf, and bud and bud, is so very different from the heroic human for whom repetition is a tragic failure”.²² In *Memorial*, it is only the natural similes that are repeated, never the human “biographies”. Applying Szerszynski’s insights to the poem, then, we might say that while there is antiphonal or reciprocal relation between the human and nonhuman worlds, Oswald contrasts the human act of war (as a “means-end” action that aims at the destruction of the enemy) with the continuous and repeated activities of the nonhuman world—and it is the violence of war that provokes an increasingly powerful response from the earth’s natural forces.

Towards the middle of the poem, Oswald begins to eschew individual biographies and instead offers the reader clusters of names of the dead. In the following excerpt (which appears on a single page), the shift between “obituaries” and similes becomes abrupt and brisk. The obituaries are now only a single sentence with no detail of the means of death, while the latter two similes are *not* doubled. Oswald writes:

Like a goatherd stands on a rock
And sees a cloud blowing towards him
A black block of rain coming closer over the sea
Pushing a ripple of wind inland
He shivers and drives his flocks into a cave for shelter

And HIPPODAMOS died

Like a traveller trudging across a plain
Who comes to a river and stands helpless
Looking down at that foamy swiftness sweeping to the sea
And takes a step back

And HYPEIROCHOS died

Like a farm boy looking after the pigs

²² Szerszynski, “The Grammar of Action in the Critical Zone”, 346.

Who tries to cross a river in a rainstorm
And gets swept away.²³

Here, overwhelming nonhuman forces—storms, raging rivers, flooding rain—threaten vulnerable human subjects, who shiver, hesitate, and step back. And the sequence culminates with the natural world “sweeping away” the young farm boy. As this suggests, there is a movement from a sense of looming threat (clouds, distant rain) to utter deluge, when the river floods from a rainstorm and takes the boy. This movement is, moreover, interrupted by the sudden and abrupt obituaries of Hippodamos and Hypeirochos. Here, then, we can see the exchanges, interactions and gentle pattern of response between the biographies and similes becoming increasingly volatile and forceful. This sense is reinforced by the absence of the doubled similes, which speeds up the oscillation between biography and simile. This gives the impression that the natural world is becoming increasingly agitated and restless in response to the accumulating slaughter and loss of life.

Indeed, in the passage quoted above, the shift between the specific (the individual names of the war-dead) and the general (the more abstract “goatherd”, “traveller”, and “farm boy”) registers the universal harm of what, in its scale and amidst such potent natural forces, begins to resemble a natural disaster. According to Coleridge, “a Symbol is characterised by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General”.²⁴ Coleridge was interested in the way the “General” or “Universal” can be seen in or through the “Individual”. In the passage quoted above, Oswald describes both individuals (Hippodamos, Hypeirochos) and the more abstract or “general” figures of the goatherd, traveller and farm boy. These two elements combine to symbolise the catastrophic level of harm wrought upon a population by a tragedy such as the Trojan War. But if Coleridge’s aim was to see through the Individual to the General and then the Universal, Oswald works in the opposite direction, using the general to focus our attention on the individual. In other words, the Greek or Trojan armies might be understood as a “special” or even a “general” class of people, an indistinguishable mass of bodies. But in *Memorial*, Oswald takes pains to register each individual, both in the list of names at the beginning of the poem and in the text. There is, then, a kind of translucence of the individual (each name) in the general (the long list of the war-dead).²⁵ That is, we see beyond the general mass of the war-dead to register each individual name. Contrary to epic poetry’s evocation of great numbers of people, in *Memorial* Oswald insists on chronicling the individual harm inflicted by war.

²³ Oswald, *Memorial*, 41.

²⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual; or, The Bible The Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*, 1816, 37, sourced from the Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford. <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dbooks>.

²⁵ Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 139-140.

True to the antiphonal structure of *Memorial*, the natural forces of Oswald's poem respond to this slaughter by rising up to resist the violence. Towards the end of *Memorial*, the nonhuman forces spill out of the world of the simile and into the human drama of the poem. This occurs when the river Scamander rises up to defend the Trojans against the violence of the Greek hero Achilles. Brooke Holmes hones in on this episode from Book 21 of Homer's poem, arguing that it shows the *Iliad* to be a text traversed by naturalcultural forces that call into question conventional interpretative frameworks that rely on "clean breaks between human and nonhuman force, nature and culture, ethics and physics, people and things, superhuman and subhuman". For Holmes, Scamander is a naturalcultural figure whose "agency is informed, on the one hand, by a dynamics of waters and winds figured as forces liable to spiral out of control and to overwhelm those in their path. On the other hand, it is shaped by the river's affective alliance with the Trojans".²⁶ Both poles are vividly suggested in the following lines, where Homer reports that

... Achilles, famed spearman, leapt to midstream
from the high bank. But the River, now rushing onward in turbulent
spate, stirred all his streams, swept up the countless
corpses that cluttered his channel, whom Achilles had killed:
these, he bellowing bull-like, tossed up onto dry land,
while the ones still alive he protected with his sweet streams,
concealing them in his eddies, which were both large and deep.²⁷

In *Memorial* this episode comes late in the text and is the longest single episode transposed from Homer's *Iliad*. Oswald depicts the scene as follows:

Near the old fig tree the cart track
That runs downhill from windy Troy
Passes two springs where the Scamander
Bubbles over stones the first one warm
The second one ice cold even in summer
Town people come and wash their clothes
In those smooth rock-scooped pools
The river knows their voices
But Achilles killed so many men
Standing downstream with his rude sword
Hacking off heads until the water
Burst out in anger lifting up a ridge of waves
That now this whole river is a grave

²⁶ Holmes, "Situating Scamander", 32-33.

²⁷ Homer, *The Iliad*, 509.

Women at the washing pools
When they hear the river running
Crying like a human through its chambers...²⁸

The passage opens with a peaceful image of an “old fig tree” and two bubbling streams, and the gentle flow of the water is evoked by the repeated “oo” sound in “smooth rock-scooped pools”. However, this peace is shattered by Achilles, who “killed so many men” that the river “burst out in anger lifting up a ridge of waves” to challenge him. The river becomes “a grave” because when it rises up it absorbs the bodies of those Achilles has killed: “All that beautiful armour underwater/ All those white bones sunk in mud”.²⁹ After the slaughter, the river grieves for the dead, “crying like a human”. Oswald depicts Scamander responding to the violence in the human world with anger, care and sadness.

Indeed, the river’s intervention prefigures the end of the violence, for the next “biography” is Hector’s and—as in the *Iliad*—the Trojan hero’s death comes at the end of the poem. Oswald’s poem concludes with a run of ten individual similes and one final repeated simile. The first of the individual similes is a translation of one of Homer’s most famous similes, spoken by the Trojan Glaukos, which compares the war-dead with falling leaves:

As the generation of leaves, so is that of mankind:
some leaves the wind scatters earthwards, but the fertile
woodland grows other as spring returns in season.
So with men: one generation grows, while another dies.³⁰

Oswald’s rendition of this reads as follows:

Like leaves who could write a history of leaves
The wind blows their ghosts to the ground
And the spring breathes new leaf into the woods
Thousands of names thousands of leaves
When you remember them remember this
Dead bodies are their lineage
Which matter no more than the leaves.³¹

As Linne and Niederhoff remark, Oswald’s translation of this simile is ambivalent about whether this history can be written. On the one hand, they argue, the simile seemingly “celebrates the idea of commemoration”, for humans are said to be “like leaves who could write a history of leaves”—or in other words, humans, unlike other animals, “transcend their mortality by recording their lives”. On the other hand, “[a] history, especially a written one, is cultural, while Oswald’s leaves

²⁸ Oswald, *Memorial*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 71.

³⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, 170.

³¹ Oswald, *Memorial*, 73.

belong to nature. A history is based on durable records and documents. Oswald's leaves are short-lived".³² They thus propose a different reading of the first line of the simile, which interprets it as a question: "Like leaves—*who* could write a history of leaves?"; and they suggest that the answer would be "nobody".³³

It is this second reading of the simile which I find the most compelling, for when Oswald reads *Memorial* she pauses between "like leaves" and "who could write a history of leaves".³⁴ But I would nevertheless argue that Linne and Neiderhoff draw too sharp a distinction between nature ("leaves") and culture ("history"). After all, in Homer's *Iliad* the analogy between falling leaves and fallen soldiers shows humanity to be a part of nature by virtue of our mortality. As Robert Pogue Harrison argues, "[t]hat the generations succeed one another like leaves on a tree—such is the order of things". For Homer, "It is natural, it is good, it is as it should be".³⁵ And as we have seen, it is this quality of Homer's poetry, its ability "to include the human and the non-human in the same picture", that Oswald is seeking to retrieve. This is the poem's enargeia. Indeed, by introducing a level of scepticism into the idea of memorialisation, Oswald is trying to bring us—to borrow the words of Latour and Weibel—back "down to earth". In effect, she reminds her readers that we cannot transcend our mortality and that we are a part of and entangled with the nonhuman world.

According to Latour and Weibel, the idea of being "down to earth" is suggestive of the idea of disenchantment—of being "rational", "objective", and "realist". This would seem at odds with Oswald's idea of enargeia as a kind of "unbearable brightness", which suggests something of the ethereal.³⁶ But at the end of the poem, we can see how this "unbearable brightness" points us towards our entanglement with the nonhuman world, and the dangers this brings.

The run of similes that follows the simile of the leaves, each printed on a single otherwise-empty page, evokes a world almost entirely emptied of humans. This is a lively world of activity, with "chaff flying everywhere at threshing time"; "great gatherings of geese and cranes and long-necked swans/ Flaring and settling in those fields where the rain runs down"; "tribes of summer bees ... Being born and reborn and shimmering over fields"; "locusts lifted rippling over fields on fire"; and wolves, which "never run out of hunger ... And still go on killing and killing".³⁷

The final simile is then printed twice: "Like when god throws a star/ And everyone looks up/ To see that whip of sparks/ And then it's gone".³⁸ Farrier argues that in this moment "the 'bright unbearable reality' of enargeia flares one last time, asserting a mode of ecological

³² Linne and Niederhoff, "The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald's *Memorial*", 36.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37. My italics on "who".

³⁴ Alice Oswald, "Alice Oswald reading *Memorial*", Hibrow, published November 28, 2018, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1coxNKht0>

³⁵ Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, 129.

³⁶ Latour and Weibel, "Seven Objections Against Landing on Earth", 13.

³⁷ Oswald, *Memorial*, 74-81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

responsibility, discovered in vulnerability and dispossession”.³⁹ Indeed the above discussion has sought to demonstrate that Oswald’s translation of the *Iliad* brings to the fore its “*enargeia*” or, in other words, the interconnection between the human and non-human worlds, expressed as antiphonal or responsive relation. This relationship is wrought to breaking point by the devastation wreaked by widespread violence. Where *Dart* evokes an entangled world of interacting human and nonhuman elements, *Memorial* shows that entanglement is always already fragility and vulnerability. In the next section, I will develop this idea by considering a text that takes its exploration of the potentially catastrophic consequences of the entanglement of the human and nonhuman world one step further than Oswald’s poem—Macfarlane’s *Ness*.

Macfarlane and The Green Knight

Ness is Robert Macfarlane’s latest and most unusual text in terms of form and genre. Described by former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion as a “freewheeling prose-poem”,⁴⁰ it is eighty-three pages long and written in a combination of prose and free-verse poetry interspersed with illustrations by the artist Stanley Donwood. According to Macfarlane, it can be understood as “a futile attempt to retell *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the Anthropocene”.⁴¹ The text describes a shingle island where, in a structure named the “Green Chapel”, a nuclear ritual is led by a figure known only as the Armourer, who is joined by The Engineer, the Botanist, The Ornithologist, and the Physicist. As the ritual proceeds, five “more-than-human” forms (as Macfarlane calls them) converge on the Chapel to prevent the ritual’s completion. Like Oswald’s *Memorial*, Macfarlane’s *Ness* proceeds through alternating sections, shifting between, on the one hand, passages describing the five figures depicted as wilful assemblages of nonhuman and human elements, and on the other hand, the progress of the human ritual. The story ends with these (super)natural figures overwhelming the human figures and becoming “Ness”. The title *Ness* refers to Orford Ness, an island off the coast of Suffolk. In an article for *The Guardian*, Macfarlane tells us that it is a restless place whose dimensions are constantly transformed by wind, rain and storms. Between 1913 and 1983 it was used by the UK’s Ministry of Defence for weapons testing; and during the 1950s and 1960s it was used for the testing of nuclear weapons. “It is”, writes Macfarlane, “a landscape produced by a collision of the human death drive and natural life”.⁴² In what follows, I will suggest that in *Ness* Macfarlane offers us a language and a form of story that allows us to see that in a (re-)enchanted

³⁹ David Farrier, “‘Like a Stone’: Ecology, Enargeia, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2014), 15.

⁴⁰ Andrew Motion, “*Ness* by Robert Macfarlane and Stanley Donwood Review”, *The Guardian*, 14 December, 2019, [Ness by Robert Macfarlane and Stanley Donwood review – forces of nature | Robert Macfarlane | The Guardian](#).

⁴¹ Robert Macfarlane, “Should This Tree.”

⁴² Ibid.

world the entangled relations and interactions between humans and nonhuman nature, which might at first seem simply wondrous, also carry the threat of catastrophe.

This section begins by suggesting that *Gawain*—just like the *Iliad*—has been misunderstood by scholars as depicting a world in which “nature” and “culture” are clearly separate. The reality is more complex than this. Composed in an historical period that can be understood as “enchanted”, *Gawain* gives expression to a world in which the boundaries between human/nonhuman, nature/culture are porous. I then go on to explore *Ness*’s sections, which are arranged so that a section focussing on the five “more-than-human” figures is followed by one on the Armourer and his followers and vice versa. This alternating structure conveys the entanglement of the human and nonhuman forces whose interactions become increasingly volatile as the text unfolds. Deploying Freud’s concept of the “death-drive” (*Todestrieb*), I suggest that the human figures are driven by a desire to transcend mortality, materiality, and their interconnection with the rest of the nonhuman world. This provokes the response of the “more-than-human” figures in a manner redolent of my discussion of the way in which Scamander rises up to thwart the violence of Achilles. The section closes by analysing the moment when, at the end of *Ness*, the nonhuman world inundates the human world.

Gawain has received increasing attention from ecocritics in recent years, with scholars focusing on ideas of “environmental stewardship”,⁴³ the representation of animals,⁴⁴ and “wilderness”.⁴⁵ The problem with much of this criticism, however, is that it takes for granted a clear division between culture, civilisation (as represented by *Gawain*) and nature or wilderness (represented by the Green Knight). Dan Popescue, for example, draws on a long tradition of *Gawain* scholarship to argue that “the [*Gawain*] poem lends itself to an ecocritical analysis in that it concentrates on an ecological setting described as a recountal of binary oppositions, such as human/non-human, inhabited/wild, hospitable/hostile”.⁴⁶ Yet the clear distinctions between nature and culture that these scholars often take for granted may owe more to intellectual developments that have come *after* the writing of the medieval poem. The *Gawain*-poet composed the poem in a historical period that was, as Taylor argues, “enchanted”. As Taylor writes in *A Secular Age* (2007), during the “pre-modern” era people believed the subjective self and the human mind were “porous” to nonhuman, cosmic, and causal forces outside the boundaries of the human body. In this “enchanted world, the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at

⁴³ Ann M. Martinez, “Bertilak’s Green Vision: Land Stewardship in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Arthuriana* 26, no. 4 (2016): 114-129; Michael W. George, “Gawain’s Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 2, no. 2 (2010): 30-44.

⁴⁴ Iris Ralph, “An Animal Studies and Ecocritical Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Neohelicon* 44 (2017): 431-444.

⁴⁵ Gillian Rudd, “‘The Wilderness of Wirral’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Arthuriana* 23, no. 1 (2013): 52-65.

⁴⁶ Dan Nicolae Popescu, “‘Þis Gome Gered in Grene’: Ecocritical Notes on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Meridian Critic* 23, No. 2 (2014): 47-48.

all clearly drawn”.⁴⁷ Of course, “pre-modern” people did not think of themselves as “enchanted”. This is a contemporary idea, which took hold after the emergence of modernity and “the disenchantment of the world”. As Nicholas Paige writes, “modernity does not so much overcome superstition but invent it: there never was an enchanted world of people who ‘really believed’ in the sense moderns give the term.”⁴⁸

A closer look at *Gawain* sees beyond the binary oppositions of culture/civilisation and nature/wildness. That which most obviously ignores these boundaries is the Green Knight himself. Sir Bertilak/The Green Knight should be considered (in a manner redolent of Holmes’ understanding of Homer’s Scamander) as a *naturalcultural* figure. On the one hand, the Green Knight is a marvel associated with wilderness and the natural world, an awesome figure of superhuman powers who mocks death. On the other, he is also Sir Bertilak, the chivalrous lord of a court comparable in grandeur to Camelot. The Green Knight/Sir Bertilak can thus be understood as a figure in whom the natural, cultural, and supernatural worlds merge. And the poem ends with this naturalcultural figure humbling and admonishing Gawain, the ideal Arthurian hero of refinement, culture and chivalry. However, in *Ness*, as we shall see, the meeting between the Green Knight and Gawain is reimagined as a collision between an entangled “more-than-human” world and humanity, which mistakenly believes itself to be separate from the rest of the world. Where the medieval poem ends with the eponymous knight chastised, Macfarlane’s adaptation ends in ruin for the human world. *Gawain*, then, depicts the enchanted, “porous” world of the past, where human and nonhuman forces were seen both to interact with each other and to cross the boundaries that separate one from the other. Macfarlane’s *Ness* gives expression to this porousness in the exchanges and interactions between the five “more-than-human” figures and the Armourer and his followers. The text shows the entanglement between nonhuman forces and human action.

On one side of the entangled relation between human and nonhuman we have the “more-than-human” figures. Macfarlane’s description of these figures deepens the sense of entanglement in *Ness*. The agency of these imaginative figures is shaped, on the one hand, by wild nonhuman forces and, on the other hand, by their complex interconnections with the human world—including their determination to thwart the human figures’ ritual. The figures are called: *it*, *he*, *she*, *they*, and *as*. They are made up of artificial and natural elements. The former includes plastic, pollution, metals, and construction materials; the latter, water, birds, fungi, stone, and so on. “*It*” is invoked as a kind of “Drift” that meshes together human pollution and natural elements: “its bones are plastic... it has cuttlefish nails & sea-poppy horns, it breathes in rain & it breathes out

⁴⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 32.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Paige, “Permanent Re-Enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics”, in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, eds. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 178-179.

rust". "*He*" is an entanglement of woodland and birds: "his bones are willow & he sings in birds". "*She*" embodies the fungal world that we explored in the first chapter in our discussion of *Underland*: "her skin is lichen & her flesh is moss & her bones are fungi, she breathes in spores & she moves by hyphae". "*They*" is a creature of deep time: "they rise on the shore, rock-cored, flint beings ... sending stones through time". And "*As*" is described only as a form of "*likeness*, [which] moves as mist & also as metal, cannot be grasped or forced". These "more-than-human" figures are governed by an unruly, chaotic energy, but at the same time they have a form of wilfulness, sentience and intentionality that we would normally associate with humanity. As Macfarlane writes, "[a]ll five know where they must go & with what they must grapple".⁴⁹

Let us examine two of these figures in detail, beginning with *It*, also known as "Drift", which is a thing of constant transformation, constituted not only by organic and natural matter, but also human made objects, global industry, and economic systems. Drift is made from tide, gravity, storm, waves, wind, gyre & coastal aspect, among other things. Drift also acknowledges its debts to the plastics & fishing industries, & to the global capital flows that determine prevailing trade currents.⁵⁰

"Drift" conjures the image of ocean pollution such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. "Drift" reminds us of the detritus that washes up on beaches everyday—it includes "a Colgate-Palmolive Teeth-Whitening Toothpaste tube, no top"; and it reminds us of the victims of ocean pollution: "Drift is long-line hooks & seine net ... Drift is a beached sperm whale ... leaking red into the rocks, watching the world grey out through one tiny upwards eye".⁵¹ And *it* acknowledges that the ocean is not the untouched inhuman space it was once believed to be, but rather is just as vulnerable to human influence as anywhere else. Drift is thus the product of the entanglement of human action (the pollution of the world upon which we depend) and natural forces (wind, water, gravity) that obey their own logic. Szerszynski argues that, like the concept of *enargeia*, the motion of "drift ... can help us make sense of forms of action and thought that do not power themselves heroically to an end, but are entangled in their conditions of possibility such that it is impossible to say who or what acts".⁵² "Drift" undermines the subject/ object, active/ passive distinction because that which drifts does not passively flow along with its surrounding environment, but neither is it actively and completely in control of its movement. Macfarlane's "Drift/ *It*" is a figure whose dynamism derives from an intricate network of natural and cultural elements. In contrast to the heroic human agent who imposes their individual agency upon the world through force, "Drift" demonstrates a kind of activity that derives from its entanglement with its environment.

⁴⁹ Macfarlane, *News*, 1, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵² Szerszynski, "The Grammar of Action in the Critical Zone", 347.

Another of the “more-than-human” figures is “*She*”. Macfarlane writes that “she” is “wired into the world. There are miles of her in a pinch of soil. Trees speak through her . . . she is moss & lichen but she is also fungi & hyphae, slipping through earth as easily as she steps through air & rising up in a riot after rain. She is committed to redefining decay as a form of verdancy, individuality as a biological aberration & gender as a parallax error or species anomaly”. Like Drift, “she” is a figure defined by entanglement. While seemingly organic, “she” is also interconnected with the human world; “as she passes houses, passes trees, passes cars, she leaves herself behind. Moss clump on roof tile, wall edge; lichen tag on road sign, fungus glowing on tree bark.”⁵³ This description of “she” is redolent of the “Understory” chapter of *Underland*, examined in the first chapter of this thesis. In that chapter, anticipating the language used to describe “she”, Merlin explains that “[f]ungi and lichen annihilate our categories of gender. They reshape our ideas of community and cooperation . . . they’re world-makers and world-breakers”.⁵⁴ The parallel is still more explicit when Macfarlane writes in *Ness* that “*she*” is “a rock-breaker, a tree-speaker, a place-shaper, a world-maker”.⁵⁵ But the key idea here is perhaps “decay as a form of verdancy”. “Verdancy” can mean “greenness”, but also “innocence, inexperience; rawness, simplicity”.⁵⁶ Like the sense of enargeia in Oswald’s doubled similes and in the simile of the fallen leaves, “she” models a kind of agency and activity that flourishes in repetition, regeneration and transformation, rather than in the relentless pursuit of power and force. In *Ness* this latter sense of agency, characterised by a rapacious desire for control, is what Macfarlane associates with the human world.

In passages alternating with the descriptions of *It*, *He*, *She*, *They*, and *As*, Macfarlane depicts the human figures in the Green Chapel performing a ritual with apocalyptic intent. The Armourer and his followers prepare a missile to be fired with the aim of, in the words of the Physicist, “perfect[ing] the physics of death”.⁵⁷ Indeed, as I noted earlier, Macfarlane describes Orford Ness as “a landscape produced by a collision of the human death drive and natural life”. Sigmund Freud proposed the idea of the “death-drive” (*Todestrieb*), positing that it is the natural propensity and desire on the part of organic life to return to an inorganic state.⁵⁸ However, the death drive not only desires the destruction of the self, but sometimes also the world around. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, the “death instincts are to begin with directed inwards and tend towards self-destruction, but they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the

⁵³ Macfarlane, *Ness*, 45-46.

⁵⁴ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 94.

⁵⁵ Macfarlane, *Ness*, 1.

⁵⁶ “Verdancy, n.,” *OED Online*, March 2021, Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com>.

⁵⁷ Macfarlane, *Ness*, 26.

⁵⁸ “Death-drive.” *Oxford Reference*, accessed 13 January, 2021.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095704767>; Robert Rowland Smith, *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 4.

aggressive or destructive instinct”.⁵⁹ In *Ness*, we can see this desire for destruction, for example, when The Engineer explains in detail the “detonation sequence” of the bomb, from its “release over the kill zone” to the moment that “the core explosively disassembles”. The desired result of the ritual is simple: “life extinct”.⁶⁰

Macfarlane presents the death drive in stark contrast to the “verdancy” of the nonhuman figures, which, as we have seen, is a form of “decay” that is akin to *enargeia* because it is “innocent” and blooms in transformation and regeneration. But though it might perhaps spring from a force similar to verdancy, the humans’ death drive is powered by a desire to transcend the body, materiality, and mortality. In order to do so, the Armourer and his followers are driven to destroy their own links to the organic, and this is then consequently turned outwards to the nonhuman material world. They look to objectify, subdue, and ultimately eradicate their entanglement with all nonhuman life. This resonates with contemporary critiques of the modern, disenchanting worldview. Latour and Weibel write that, “Modernizers, from wherever they live, have cut all ties between the world they live in and the one they live from: they have escaped gravity”.⁶¹ Critics of disenchantment argue that this perceived separation between humanity and the rest of the world allows us to consider the earth and its nonhuman life as objects and resources over which we can exert ruinous force. This is why, according to Latour and Weibel, we need to come back “down to earth” to avoid catastrophe.

Ironically, it is precisely this desire to escape from the clutches of the material, mortal, and contingent world, and the resultant desire to erase all nonhuman life, that rouses *It*, *He*, *She*, *They*, and *As* into action that ends with the human figures totally overwhelmed by the forces of the (super)natural beings. The latter invade the Green Chapel and converge to become *Ness*:

The Armourer’s hair is bracken, his innards are thickening peat, his back is clattered into a row of stones, his prick is soft and gilled as the Death Cap, foxes snarl in his blood, his tendons are all turned to high breaking-strain monofilament, all turned to the wind-blown note of D flat, swifts scream through him on their hooligan tours, each of his ten nails is amber, his borders shift and re-form in each storm and he is *Ness*.⁶²

The death-drive is fulfilled—not as the Armourer and his followers intended, with all life extinguished, but with the human figures themselves absorbed into the nonhuman world. As the “more-than-human” figures invade the Chapel, which becomes “a deep green, a moss green, the green where shadow meets leaf”, the Engineer says:

⁵⁹ Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 97.

⁶⁰ Macfarlane, *Ness*, 51, 53.

⁶¹ Latour and Weibel, “Seven Objections Against Landing on Earth”, 15.

⁶² Macfarlane, *Ness*, 77.

Armourer, can you not see that we are being buried from the day ... We are down now past the plastic, the sea-coal, the flip-flops, down through the flints, the quartzites, the hags, and down to the imprint-taking, relic-yielding clay.⁶³

The text closes with an image of a world shattered by catastrophic natural force. Despite the nuclear ritual being thwarted, there has been another kind of disaster—and this has resulted in the human world being abruptly and irretrievably destroyed. As Macfarlane writes in the closing lines, this is a world “experiencing uncontrolled ruination”. The writer certainly presents this as an horrific and above all eerie outcome. But equally Macfarlane also seems to hold out the possibility that this is an act of salvation for the earth, for he describes how life perseveres and even regenerates after the destruction, as “the bomb is buried beneath more layers of moss ... Willow flourishes as forest/ [and] elder jungles each dip”. The novella then ends with a gentle rhythm, conveying the now peaceful landscape of Ness:

The foreshore is moving as if it were alive,
because it is alive.

Afternoon moonrise. Long light. Low sun.

Slow dusk.

Shingle hush from distal to Ness.⁶⁴

In the *Guardian* article following the publication of *Ness*, Macfarlane argued that the modern story of disenchantment has dispelled the enchanted forces of the past from our world. And this has been followed by the devastating loss of nonhuman life on account of environmental destruction. He writes: “The dryads and naiads of classical myth, those lively spirits of trees and streams, have long since been driven out. Now birds, mammals, plants and insects are vanishing too, leaving humans increasingly alone in the world”.⁶⁵

Macfarlane links *Ness* to a “new animism”, which he has elsewhere described as emerging across the world in environmentalism, law, and literature. For him, the new animism posits the “bold ontological claim” that “natural” phenomena such as lakes, rivers or forests should be treated as “living beings”, at a time when the earth “is revealing itself as both acutely vulnerable and restlessly lively”.⁶⁶ In so doing, *Ness* makes an important contribution to Macfarlane’s notion of enchantment and of the entangled relations between humans and nonhumans on which this is based. In *Underland*, as we have seen, entanglement is primarily a source of wonder; but in *Ness*, the same phenomenon opens the possibility that the non-human world can both provide and remove the conditions that support human life. This latter, as Macfarlane notes above, has become obvious in a time of climate change and environmental breakdown. We can therefore say that in

⁶³ Macfarlane, *Ness*, 65.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

⁶⁵ Macfarlane, “Should This Tree.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

Macfarlane's texts the language of (re-)enchantment is broad enough to encompass the harmonious and dangerous trajectories made possible by the entangled relation between humans and nonhuman forces. Let us finally turn, then, to the conclusion of this chapter where I draw together my readings of *Memorial* and *Ness* to suggest that these texts offer us a language to engage with the potentially threatening interactions between humanity and the nonhuman world, and our mutual vulnerability.

Allegory and re-enchantment

In the final pages of this chapter, I want to turn to a literary theorist and philosopher, Walter Benjamin, whose canonisation, according to Jason Josephson-Storm, has smuggled an enchanted vocabulary into the "analytical edifice of postmodernity".⁶⁷ I will use Benjamin's literary theory to reflect on the allegorical nature of *Memorial* and *Ness*. Benjamin is one of the most famous and influential theorists of a disenchanted modernity. He is associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, which sought to explain how modernity and disenchantment led to the horrors of totalitarianism and genocide. As Josephson-Storm writes, "we look to critical theorists to be reminded that disenchantment has meant the domination of nature, the dehumanisation of humanity, the end of wonder, and the destruction of myth."⁶⁸ What separated Benjamin from the other members of the Frankfurt school, however, was his sophisticated interest in the esoteric and occult, and his belief in the persistence of myth in modernity.

Benjamin made particularly influential contributions to the literary theory of allegory. Much has been written about Benjamin's theory of allegory, and the work in which he most explicitly tackles the topic, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), is a famously difficult text.⁶⁹ But here I draw on Benjamin's work to put forward a conception of allegory as a literary form of re-enchantment. *Allegory* functions through a visible and literal surface story which, through symbols contextualised by a narrative structure, links to a second idea. Conventional notions of allegory see the second level of meaning as fixed, available only to a select few, and it usually requires interpretation. The concept's etymology, *allos* and *agoreuein*, can be understood to suggest "speaking-other" publicly, or in a public place.⁷⁰ Allegory originally pertained to the sacred or theological, and this is where Benjamin's specific understanding of it comes in. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin posits that allegory functions through a double movement: the first

⁶⁷ Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 226, 227.

⁶⁸ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 239.

⁶⁹ Howard Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Allegory", in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* eds. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 241.

⁷⁰ This is a combination of Margaret Cohen and Kyoo Lee's analysis of allegory's etymology: Margaret Cohen, "Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria", *New German Critique*, No. 48 (1989): 96; Kyoo Lee, "A Calligraphy of Time: Allegory (Dis)orders in the Materialist Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man", *Parallax* 10, no. 3 (2004): 7.

act of allegory is the fragmentation of the experience of being in the “real” or physical world. That is, allegory turns experience into signs and symbols.⁷¹ The second act is restorative, in which new meaning is constructed in a literary context out of the ruins of the real.⁷² For Benjamin, allegory could lead to the sacred, transcendent and redemptive—it could be, in short, a form of re-enchantment.⁷³

But for Benjamin, this understanding of allegory foundered in the nineteenth-century culture of high capitalism. For Benjamin, allegory was both a condition of the experience of modernity (which has been described as the “allegorical predicament”)⁷⁴ and an artistic means of its expression.⁷⁵ The “allegorical predicament” of modernity is explored in Benjamin’s famous arcades project, in which the philosopher suggests that the culture of high capitalism results in the destabilisation—or what Benjamin called the “petrified unrest”—of meaning.⁷⁶ The restorative movement of allegory thus becomes fraught; or in other words there is no longer a clear correlation between the literal surface story of allegory and its hidden, redemptive meaning. The fluid, bewildering temporality of high capitalism means that there is a rupture between the two levels of allegory. As Cowan writes, in the nineteenth century “[t]he *experience* of allegory as a sudden change of referentiality becomes its foremost characteristic. When there is no longer a proper language or set of images for allegory ... [it becomes] more difficult, necessarily fragmentary”.⁷⁷

This chapter has explored the idea that the “porous” past and today’s “entangled” present are worlds that are fragile, vulnerable, and even *dangerous*, as well as complex, vibrant and lively (as I demonstrated in chapter one). The problem is that if we focus on the former, we enter an entropic world heading hopelessly towards calamity. But if we focus on the latter, we fall into the trap of an idealistic, naïve wonder which prevents us from taking action. And yet it seems that, at least for the moment, both of these possibilities co-exist. As a possible solution, I would suggest that allegory in *Memorial* and *Ness* is a way of making meaning before—and in order to avert—apocalypse. It offers hope, but only in the knowledge that we face catastrophe. In Benjamin’s notion of allegory there are two acts: the first act fragments our experience of being in the “real” world by transforming experience into signs and symbols. The second is restorative, constructing new meaning out of the ruins of the “real”. I would argue that both *Memorial* and *Ness* treat the past (their source texts) as “signs and symbols”. This means that there is no a fixed meaning to the *Iliad* or *Gawain* that can be given by tradition. But rather than being a disorientating symptom of

⁷¹ Bernard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory”, *New German Critique*, No. 22 (1981), 110.

⁷² Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Allegory”, 248.

⁷³ Cohen, “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria”, 96.

⁷⁴ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Allegory”, 251.

⁷⁵ Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory”, 109.

⁷⁶ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Allegory”, 251; Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles, “Walter Benjamin”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Winter 2019 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/benjamin/>.

⁷⁷ Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory”, 120.

modernity (as Benjamin would have it), this is a means of creating, uncovering, or “excavating” a hopeful new message from the texts.

This chapter has shown that Oswald has transformed the *Iliad* to highlight its *enargeia*, namely the inter-implication and interdependence of the human and non-human worlds, but also the devastation wrought by violence and dehumanising force. I have also demonstrated that Macfarlane has rewritten *Gawain* to foreground the possibility of a collision—which is only hinted at in *Gawain*—between the nonhuman world and humanity, which has become an increasingly common occurrence in today’s world. *Memorial* and *Ness* can thus be understood as allegorical readings of their source texts which draw out what the two authors see as their central tensions. For Oswald, it is Homer’s *enargeia*, and for Macfarlane it is the *Gawain*-poet’s exploration of the interdependence of the regimes of nature and culture in an “enchanted world”.

Benjamin wrote that allegory aims to construct new meaning from historical material. I would argue that *Memorial* and *Ness* enable us to see anew our current situation. Specifically, these texts ask us to recognise that we are delicately intertwined with the rest of the world in a relation of mutual dependency. Oswald and Macfarlane’s wager is arguably that that by finding a new language to talk about vulnerability and the threat of climate breakdown, we can see more clearly where the deep historical story of humanity—the allegorical thread from prehistory, to Homer’s Ancient Greece, and the medieval era of the *Gawain*-poet, all the way to today—might lead to. In these first two chapters we have seen that our entanglement can be in turns (perhaps even at the same time) wondrous and frightening. The burden of the final chapter of this thesis is to resist the pull of these divergent ideas. Instead, I will attempt to negotiate the terrain between them.

Chapter 3

[A]nd for once the old notion of ghosts seems new and true in this space. These figures are *ghosts* all dancing together, and I am a ghost too, and there is a conviviality to them, to *us*, to the thousands of years for which they have been dancing here together.

—Macfarlane, *Underland*.

[I]t takes your breath away,
generations of [salmon] inscribed into this river ...

—Oswald, *Dart*.

In the first of this chapter's epigraphs, in ancient sea-caves where the passage of time feels strange, Macfarlane feels the spectral presence of humanity's prehistoric ancestors through an encounter with their art. In the second, Oswald conjures the ghostly presence of the innumerable generations of salmon that have shaped the ecology of the river Dart—but now their absence is a sign of the loss of the river's biodiversity along with the livelihood of its fishermen. Both epigraphs, then, describe places where the haunting presence of the past is made arrestingly manifest in the present. This is, however, coupled with a sense of wonder, expressed in the first through Macfarlane's sense of the "conviviality" between past and present and in the second through Oswald's visceral response to the untold "generations of [salmon] inscribed" in the river. In previous chapters of this thesis, I have argued that our entangled world can be in turns (perhaps even at the same time) wondrous and frightening. The burden of this final chapter aims to resist being drawn towards one or other of these diverging responses in order to negotiate the terrain between them.

This chapter argues that Oswald and Macfarlane's new nature writing is composing a new form of enchantment, which draws on the language of old forms of enchantment (what Macfarlane, in the first of the epigraphs above, calls the "old notion of ghosts") in order to show the "new and true" ways that we are entangled with forces and entities beyond the human. The chapter begins by analysing the evocation of ghosts in Oswald's *Dart* and Macfarlane's *Underland*. I argue that in these texts the figure of the ghost signals both past plenitude and present loss, while also building lines of communication between the past and the present. Ghosts show us that the present is not an unchangeable reality—things were different in the past and could be again, for better or worse, in the future.

I then explore what David Farrier calls the "haunted time" of Oswald's *Memorial*. I argue that the poem conjures ghosts both from the ancient past and from a distant hypothetical future. I show that Oswald, by excavating the *Iliad*, invokes the ghostly voices of those who died on the

killing fields of Troy and who can therefore speak of this catastrophe that disturbed nature. Next I suggest that these ghostly voices from the past help us as readers to imagine a future poet/archaeologist (a ghost or phantasm, when seen from our point of view in the present), who will one day unearth signs of the catastrophe taking place in our present. I then return to *Memorial's* doubled similes, which in the previous chapter I suggested convey the *enargeia* of the natural world. Here I posit that the doubled similes imbue the poem with a consistent formal rhythm that evokes the endless cycles of transformation and renewal in the natural world—but this is not the only rhythm in the poem. The doubled similes are also interleaved with the obituaries, and I argue that this reflects the interwoven rhythms of humanity and nature and depicts a (relatively) harmonious world—until the catastrophic end of the poem.

In the final part of the chapter, I argue that “haunted time” might be best understood as expressing the time after catastrophe, when the relation between human and nonhuman has been unwoven by disaster and the world has been emptied of humanity. Oswald and Macfarlane, I suggest, depict the fragility of humanity’s place in our entangled and damaged world, and they write with the knowledge that the extinction of humanity is a real possibility.

Ghostly Natures

Although all the ghosts conjured by Oswald and Macfarlane’s new nature writing are disruptive, they play different roles—some speak of absence and ruin, evoking a sense of loss; others conjure a sense of connection and community with the past; and a third group speak of both. As I will argue, all these ghosts trouble the binary division between hope and fear: while they are signs of what has been lost, they also stop us from succumbing to what has been called “shifting baseline syndrome”, whereby one becomes accustomed to increasing levels of environmental breakdown and, in so doing, forgets what once was reality.¹ Tsing, Swanson, Gan and Bubandt argue that forgetting is one of the ways in which “[o]ur newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality”. Ghosts, they add, resist the tendency to forget, they “remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces”.² In the following pages, I will argue that Oswald’s and Macfarlane’s ghosts play similar roles: by helping us recall what has been lost, they represent the present as contingent and, in so doing, suggest that, if we were to take action now, the catastrophe now approaching us from the future could be averted.

¹ Milton Muldrow Jr. et al., “R. Shifting baseline syndrome among coral reef scientists”, *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0526-0>.

² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene”, in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.

I argued in my first chapter that Oswald evokes in *Dart* the lively, unruly movement of the river; but the poet's account of the Dart is also suffused with spirits, mythical figures, and ghosts. The most prominent of the spirits is Jan Coo, whose name means "So-and-So of the Woods". He drowned in the river many years ago and has now become, Oswald tells us,

the groom of the Dart—I've seen him
taking the shape of the sky, a bird, a blade,
a fallen leaf, a stone—may he lie long
in the inexplicable knot of the river's body ... ³

Like the river, Jan Coo is a metamorphic and fluid figure, and his call ("woooo") recurs throughout the poem. He is joined by many more spectral and mythical figures: there is a water nymph who tries to seduce a woodsman who is deaf to her calls; there are ancient woodland spirits from a mythical time "when oak trees were men/ [and] when water was still water," and several voices of those who, like Jan Coo, have drowned in the river.

These ghosts and spirits paint a picture of what the river once was and, therefore, what has now been lost. The woodsman's inability to hear the water nymph as he goes about his work felling trees indicates the disappearance of an "enchanted" world in which people were sensitive to the spirits of the river and forest. The water nymph repeatedly calls out to the woodsman, urging him to "see me in the moonlight/ [When I] comb my cataract of hair"; but he is deaf to her voice and continues to clear the forest. As well as the spirits that speak, like the water nymph and Jan Coo, the Dart is also populated by ghosts that testify to past plenitude and present loss, as in the case of the river's salmon. Oswald recalls how salmon once used to fill the river in great numbers:

all the way from Iceland, from the Faroës,
a three-sea-winter fish coming up on the spate,
on the full moon, when the river spreads out ... ⁴

Huge, shining salmon would swim up against the current and crowd the waterfalls and pools of the river. There, the salmon would provide food and sport for those that lived along the Dart: "medics, milkmen, policemen, millionaires, cheering themselves up".⁵ Similarly, the voice of the "salmon netsman and poacher" nostalgically recalls the river before it was polluted by objects made by humans, such as buoys, and depleted of its fish:

Back in the days when I was handsome and the river
was just river—
not all these buoys everywhere that trip your net so that you've
got to cut the headrope and the mesh goes fshoo like a zip.

³ Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

Terrifying.

And there was so many salmon you could sit up to your knees in
dead fish keeping your legs warm.⁶

The reasons for this loss are suggested a few pages later in the poem, when the melancholic voice of the salmon netsman is heard again:

But if you're lucky, at the last knockings it's a salmon with his
great hard bony nose—
you hit him with a napper and he goes on twitching in the boat
asking for more, more to come, more salmon to come.
But there aren't many more these days. They get caught off
Greenland in the monofilaments.⁷

The local ecology has been profoundly changed by events occurring many miles away, which are part of the global fishing industry.

The loss of the Dart's salmon, then, is experienced by the river's inhabitants as a present absence—a ghost—which signals a diminution of the river's rich life and, for the fisherman, the loss of a way of life. For the characters in the poem who see or feel this ghost, it evokes a deep sense of melancholy. Much the same might occur for readers, if the salmon are taken as a synecdoche for the extinctions taking place across the earth as a result of the material and industrial processes of global capitalism. In both contexts, melancholy indirectly represents just how closely our lives are entangled with the non-human world around us—a topic which is also taken up by Macfarlane.

Like *Dart*, *Underland* describes landscapes whose once-thriving ecosystems have been devastated by human activity, while also examining the emotional responses, to this loss, of the people whose livelihoods are (or were) deeply entwined with these landscapes. To my mind, the affective consequences of environmental breakdown explored by Macfarlane in *Underland* should be considered as a kind of “haunting.” The most important example of this can be found in a chapter entitled “The Edge,” where this haunting is accompanied by a sense of *solastalgia*, a term coined by Glenn Albrecht in 2003 to describe “the distress caused by environmental damage”.⁸ In contrast to nostalgia, which refers to a sentimental longing for a period in the past or a longing for familiar surroundings, “solastalgia” is the sense of loss and homesickness felt by people who are aware of, but feel unable to stop, changes to the place in which they live that are the result of environmental degradation. Macfarlane encounters a case of solastalgia when he meets a Norwegian fisherman named Bjørnar Nicolaisen, who has long been fighting oil testing and drilling

⁶ Oswald, *Dart*, 37.

⁷ Alice Oswald, *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (London, Faber and Faber, 2011), 41.

⁸ Glenn Albrecht et al., “Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change”, *Australasian Psychiatry* 15, no. 1, (2007): S95–S98, doi:[10.1080/10398560701701288](https://doi.org/10.1080/10398560701701288).

in the cold-water reefs of the Lofoten and Vesterålen archipelagos. These islands are situated above the Arctic Circle and, therefore, it would be reasonable to assume, wild and untouched; yet even here, like every landscape encountered in *Underland*, Macfarlane finds evidence of environmental damage caused by humans. In both Lofoten and Vesterålen he is dismayed by the enormous amount of litter: “the density of human debris is shocking. Fishing buoys, toothbrushes, bleach bottles, tangled fishing nets, thousands of unidentifiable shards. I feel sick as I walk the wrack-line and its litter, appalled by the contrast with the plateau, implicated by my part in the scene”.⁹ Macfarlane’s affective response to this landscape is thus one of shock, disgust and repulsion caused at least in part by his sense of entanglement in the scene, first as a human among “human debris”; second, as a visitor like many other visitors to this landscape, who contribute to its degradation; and third simply as a person immersed in the scene by his senses.

Macfarlane’s response as a visitor to this landscape is quite different from that felt by Nicolaisen, who grew up in the region. In the 2000s Nicolaisen became one of the leading figures in a movement to prevent oil testing and drilling off the coasts of the Lofoten and Vesterålen archipelagos. The production levels of Norwegian oil—long a driving force of the Norwegian economy—had begun to diminish and companies were looking for new places in which to find oil. It was estimated that 1.3 billion barrels of oil were to be found off Lofoten and Vesterålen. A group formed, in which Nicolaisen played a leading role, which resisted and continues to resist drilling off these coasts. But the efforts took a great toll on Nicolaisen, who eventually had a mental breakdown and had to spend weeks in a psychiatric ward. In contrast to Macfarlane’s reaction, which seems an amalgam of guilt and aesthetic distaste, Nicolaisen suffered long-term trauma.

Although Nicolaisen recovered, he continues to experience the landscape with a sense of *solastalgia*. He says to Macfarlane:

“[s]ince the seismic testing ... everything has changed here. You know the fish that we are going to catch today? They disappeared ... and only in 2015 did they start to come back. Six years after the blasting. The whales, too, it affected them. The orca left also. And we began to see sperm whales in the fjords, where they had been driven by hunger”.¹⁰

In passages like this, *solastalgia* is linked to the uncanny: the landscape with which Nicolaisen was familiar, shaped by a life of living and fishing, had been made strange owing to the effects of corporate industrial intervention. The chapter ends uneasily, with Macfarlane describing the enduring pain Nicolaisen feels: “[s]uddenly he seems tired, sad. His eyes are rheumy. He works his jaws silently, as if they have become stuck together, his mouth gummed up”.¹¹ These symptoms seem to express the kind of “psychoterratic” trauma described by Glenn Albrecht, whereby

⁹ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), 319.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹¹ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 322.

people's mental health is entangled with, and affected by, the health of the ecosystems in which they live.¹² Moreover, one might argue that this description portrays Nicolaisen as a man *haunted* by the damage wrought upon his landscape and exhausted by his efforts to stop those responsible—even though Nicolaisen was eventually able to stop further wells being opened in the Lofoten and Vesterålen archipelago by the oil companies. The majority of the Norwegian population, he reports to Macfarlane, protest offshore drilling. And, still more positively, the fish that had been depleted have begun to return to the seas. In “The Edge,” Macfarlane thus draws our attention to the affective consequences experienced by those like Nicolaisen living on the front-line of the fight against environmental destruction. The writer depicts this in a way that we might describe as “haunting”, according to which, as we see in Nicolaisen, people are deeply affected by environmental damage, change and the loss of familiarity with their landscapes.

The haunting of Oswald and Macfarlane's new nature writing, then, should be understood as not only giving expression to loss, grief, and fear of further devastation, but also as an attempt to remind us of what has disappeared and thus, as we saw with Nicolaisen, to prompt our resistance to developments that would cause more loss. The haunting of the partially-ruined landscapes of the Anthropocene—whether the Dart emptied of salmon or the polluted Norwegian coastline—is evidence of the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman worlds, with the former capable of damaging the latter. In the chapter from *Underland* that we have been discussing and recalling the earlier scene of the sea eagle eyeing him as lunch in the birch woods, Macfarlane writes:

In the Anthropocene we cannot easily keep nature at a distance, holding it at arm's length for adoration or inspection. Nature is no longer only a remote peak shining in the sun, or a raptor hunting over birch woods—it is also tidelines thickened with drift plastic, or methane clathrates decomposing over millions of square miles of warming permafrost. This new nature entangles us in ways we are only beginning to comprehend.¹³

Ghosts thus point to our entanglement with our damaged planet and ecosystems. They are signs of our culpability and responsibility, and they call on us to take action to prevent further damage and loss.

Ghosts are thus intimately related to time—they indicate the precarity of our current era, which has been damaged by humanity's past (and present) actions, which in turn makes the future uncertain. As Derrida notes, the figure of the ghost is one that troubles and unsettles the boundaries between past, present and future.¹⁴ But the ghost also discloses that the future need *not* be the same as the troubled present. In other words, ghosts show us that we can draw upon the past to imagine a different future. In *Underland* Macfarlane advocates “deep time as a radical

¹² Albrecht et al, “Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change”, 95.

¹³ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 321.

¹⁴ Ezra Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 136.

perspective” on the present, which he explores using the language of ghosts. This is most explicitly developed in the chapter entitled “Red Dancers”, in which he describes his journey through the wild coastal landscape of the Lofoten archipelago in order to find prehistoric cave art that depicts red “dancing” figures. As I argued in chapter one, in this episode Macfarlane describes humanity as entangled with the nonhuman world’s lively networks of interaction and dizzyingly deep orders of time. But the episode also opens abruptly and mysteriously with a spectre: “[l]ooking across the bay to the northern shore – and there by the glimmering birches is a figure standing dark on rising ground, where no figure should be”.¹⁵

This ghostly figure is left unexplained while Macfarlane tells the story of his journey through the wild landscape and into the cave. However, a similar figure returns when Macfarlane encounters the figures on the wall of the cave—indeed he describes the red dancing figures as ghosts: “when I open my eyes and look again ... *there*, yes, is a red dancer, scarcely visible but unmistakable, a phantom red dancer leaping on the rock. And there is another, and another, *here*, a dozen or more of them, spectral still but present now ...” Macfarlane goes on to write that:

[F]or once the old notion of ghosts seems new and true in this space. These figures are *ghosts* all dancing together, and I am a ghost too, and there is a conviviality to them, to *us*, to the thousands of years for which they have been dancing here together.¹⁶

Like the ghosts described by Derrida, these spectral dancing figures disrupt the boundaries between the deep past and the contemporary moment, while also seeming to make present what remains absent, namely their prehistoric creators. The dancers thus seem to bring us into contact and community with our distant ancestors and with the deep past. And after leaving the cave, echoing the beginning of the chapter, Macfarlane encounters another similar (or perhaps identical) ghostly figure:

I look across the bay to the northern shore and there, *there*, by the glimmering birches is a figure standing dark on rising ground, where no figure should be. The figure is in silhouette and does not move; it is human-like and it is facing me.¹⁷

Macfarlane does not attempt to explain the ghostly figure. But it is nevertheless reasonable to note, as I have been arguing up to this point, that like all ghosts in *Underland* this one has multiple meanings. First, the ghostly figure on the shore points to the damage that this remote landscape has suffered. As Macfarlane moves along the coastline, he sees, “puzzlingly, hundreds of perfect spheres”, which turn out to be “hollow iron net-floats from fishing trawlers—vast numbers of them, beached and rusted, like alien eggs. Between and around them is a thick wrack of plastic jetsam, repulsive in its presence on this wild coast: plastic bottles, tangles of nylon netting, fish-

¹⁵ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 253.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 278.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 284.

crate fragments”.¹⁸ Like the monofilaments which stop the salmon reaching the Dart or the waste on the coastline where Nicolaisen lives, this human detritus reminds us of the haunting presence of pollution in this partially ruined landscape.

The ghostly presence on the shore and the spectral red dancing figures described by Macfarlane also convey, as the writer says, a sense of “conviviality” with the past, or what might be understood as an emotional connection and sense of community across deep time. Although the spectral figure is troubling, it might perhaps also be a ghost of those humans who, before Macfarlane, visited the cave—the prehistoric ancestors who painted the figures and the explorers who found them, whether in the modern era or earlier. Likewise, the dancing figures offer Macfarlane a sense of connection with those humans who came to the cave before him in search of meaning and to make art. Indeed, as archaeologist Izzy Wisher writes, making cave art for prehistoric people “imbued a sense of kinship and connection ... [t]his emotive, communal experience perhaps enriched a sense of belonging and rooted a deep understanding of their place within the world”.¹⁹ This sense of connection and community is a key to Macfarlane’s argument that we should see

deep time as a radical perspective, provoking us to action not apathy. For to think in deep time can be a means not of escaping our troubled present, but rather of re-imagining it ... At its best, a deep time awareness might help us see ourselves as part of a web of gift, inheritance and legacy ... bringing us to consider what we are leaving behind for the epochs and beings that will follow us.²⁰

For Macfarlane, the past can be a means of “re-imagining” the present. As I have been arguing in this chapter, Macfarlane is drawing on the language of an enchanted past to help us see more clearly our present. Moreover, throughout the thesis I have argued that Macfarlane (and Oswald) are trying to re-describe the world in order to re-imagine it as a lively place of vibrant interactions that can be both wondrous and terrifying. Here we can see that re-imagining and re-describing the present might help us reconsider our present actions and ensure a different future.

Haunted Time

Ethan Kleinberg writes that in Derrida’s “hauntology”, the figure of the ghost “calls on us to confront the way we are haunted by the past and to recognise the ways we inscribe ourselves in the present”.²¹ In recent years, however, scholars have also begun more energetically to explore the ways that humanity is inscribing itself on the distant future. By drawing on James Hatley’s

¹⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 268.

¹⁹ Izzy Wisher, “Cave Art”, *Aeon*, 11 December, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/ice-age-art-making-was-a-tactile-joyous-exploration-of-the-world>.

²⁰ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 15.

²¹ Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, 137.

concept of “ethical time” and its ecocritical application by Deborah Rose Bird, David Farrier has argued that Oswald’s *Memorial* gives expression to “haunted time”, which accounts for the ways that our present era, the Anthropocene, is marked by an awareness of deep, geological time *and* the urgent time of environmental destruction, the effects of which reach deep into the future. For Farrier, the Anthropocene means that “we both identify with ‘deep time’ processes and conjure the ghosts of those whose lives to come will be shaped in drastic ways by our actions in the present”.²² According to Farrier, Oswald’s adaptation of the *Iliad* “offers ... a realisation of the Anthropocene’s peculiar temporal torsions”, which he explores by focussing on the poem’s repeated similes. In his view, “[t]his uncanny aspect of the similes [their repetition], so oddly dispersed in time, requires the reader to occupy simultaneous but disjunct temporalities”.²³

Certainly, Farrier offers a compelling reading of Oswald’s poem—but I do not think that it is Oswald’s similes that convey a sense of “haunted time”; and in my view the poem’s form does not explicitly evoke geological orders of time that reach into the earth’s deep past or far distant future. Rather, in what follows I will argue that, in a manner similar to Macfarlane’s spectral red dancing figures, Oswald’s *Memorial* describes ghosts that show us to be a part of a *human* community stretching from antiquity to the present and to future generations. By excavating the catastrophe that unfolded at Troy, Oswald allows the ghostly voices of Homer’s war-dead to speak of an event so terrible that it drew the natural world into its orbit and provoked a response from nonhuman forces, represented by the river Scamander. This excavation invites the reader to imagine, through analogy, an unknown future archaeologist who will one day find in the geological record signs of a way of life (*our* way of life) so destructive that it disrupted the climate and the earth’s life systems. Moreover, in the following pages I will build on my argument from chapter two, where I contended that the doubled similes express *enargeia*—the endless rhythms of production and reproduction of life in the nonhuman world—to argue that the consistent repetition of the similes affords the poem a structure and rhythm that evoke the natural world’s cycles of life and renewal. But just as importantly, I will suggest that Oswald’s interweaving of the rhythm of the repeated natural similes with the beat of the human biographies evokes, ephemerally, a harmonious relation between humanity and the earth.

Memorial conjures ghosts through its different temporal layers. As a contemporary adaptation of a classical poem, *Memorial* is by its very nature a polytemporal text. Homer’s *Iliad* is one of the oldest surviving works of Greek literature. Before it was written down it was passed on orally, a mode of transmission in which the poem has the potential to change with each re-telling. This is why, as scholar Tim Whitmarsh writes,

²² David Farrier, “‘Like a Stone’: Ecology, *Enargeia*, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*”, *Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2014), 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

Historically speaking, the [*Iliad* and *Odyssey*] are an amalgam of different temporal layers: some elements are drawn from the contemporary world of the 8th century BCE, some are genuine memories of Bronze Age times, and some (like Achilles' phrase 'immortal glory') are rooted in seriously ancient Indo-European poetics.²⁴

By adapting the *Iliad* in the present, Oswald adds yet another of these layers to Homer's work, which the poet foregrounds by subtitled her retelling of Homer's poem *An Excavation of the Iliad*. "Excavation" suggests that the role of the poet or translator is akin to the work of the archaeologist, unearthing from the *Iliad's* pages the strata and the ghosts of an ancient past age. Oswald draws our attention to this fact throughout the poem. In the very first obituary, the poet reminds us that we are remembering the war-dead "thousands of years" after the Trojan war:

The first to die was PROTESILAUS

A focused man who hurried to darkness...

He's been in the black earth now for thousands of years²⁵

By giving Protesilaus a micro-biography, it is as if Oswald is disinterring the dead man from the "black earth," in order to allow him to speak, before he is returned to the earth again. In her introductory note to the poem, Oswald writes that "[t]he *Iliad* is a vocative poem. Perhaps (in common with lament) it is invocative. It always addresses Patroclus as 'you', as if speaking directly to the dead. This translation presents the whole poem as a kind of oral cemetery."²⁶ In ancient Greek the vocative grammatical case was used to indicate a person or thing being addressed. In this note, Oswald is therefore suggesting that, like Homer's poem, *Memorial* is "speaking directly to the dead". Is it also "invocative". "To invoke" means to call upon or summon a person, a spirit, or even a god to bear witness to something.²⁷ Although Oswald writes only that the *Iliad* is perhaps "invocative", in my view *Memorial* certainly is: Oswald calls upon the ghosts of the dead to testify to the great catastrophe in which they took part. The war-dead are an important part of Homer's narrative, but Oswald's choice to dismiss the epic narrative in favour of the poem's biographies and similes gives them much more force. The numerous ghosts of the war dead in *Memorial* speak of loss, precarity, blindness, and unstoppable disaster in ways that indirectly represent, without claiming to mirror, the catastrophe beginning to unfold in the present.

While unearthing the ghost(s) of the past, Oswald also conjures apparitions from the future. Later in the poem, for example, she writes of "someone" who, years after the Greeks have returned home, uncovers an artifact from the war:

²⁴ Tim Whitmarsh, "Black Achilles", *Aeon*, May 9, 2018, <https://aeon.co/essays/when-homer-envisioned-achilles-did-he-see-a-black-man>.

²⁵ Oswald, *Memorial*, 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ "Invoke, v.," *OED Online*, June 2021, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/99173?redirectedFrom=invoke> (accessed July 13, 2021).

DAMASOS the Trojan
Running at a man thinking kill kill
In years to come someone will find his helmet
Shaped like a real head²⁸

This brings to mind the archaeologists, mostly famously Heinrich Schliemann, who in the nineteenth century discovered what is believed to be the historical site of Troy. Furthermore, one might argue that this unknown “someone” from “years to come” can help us imagine an archaeologist from the future who will interpret our epoch through our human strata, detritus and fossils. Indeed, for scholar Mary Louise Pratt, calling the era to which we belong the Anthropocene suggests that we are ‘in the present [imaging] a subject who, long after humans are gone, reconstructs our era through what it will have left behind’.²⁹ Thus to my mind, by imagining the person who uncovers the evidence of the catastrophe that took place at Troy, *Memorial* provides an analogy for that unknown figure who will discover the ruins of our own civilisation and who can, in the present, only be imagined as a ghost or spectre. While reading this poem we therefore encounter ghosts from the past, who bear witness to the calamity that happened at Troy, and from the future, who will discover what happened many years before she or he was born. Oswald thus introduces twin radical-perspectives, both arguably functioning in the present as versions of the disinterested observer that in the 18th and 19th century was a source of moral authority,³⁰ which might push us to imagine a future from which our present will be studied and judged and also to reconsider the legacy we are leaving for future generations.

As noted above, Farrier argues that the Anthropocene means that we “conjure the ghosts of those whose lives to come will be shaped in drastic ways by our actions in the present”.³¹ Oswald arguably includes these unborn ghosts when she recounts the death of Adrestus, a Trojan who almost survived by begging Menelaus to spare his life. But Agamemnon heard his pleading and said to Menelaus:

Don't tell me you love these men
With their impeccable wife-thief manners
A death-curse on all of them kill them all
Even the unborn ones in their mothers' bellies
Be uncried for unburied

²⁸ Oswald, *Memorial*, 44-45.

²⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, “Coda: Concept and Chronotope”, in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 170-171.

³⁰ David Daiches Raphael, “The Impartial Spectator”, in *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 42.

³¹ Farrier, “Like a Stone”, 1.

And that was the earth's moment

That was the death of Adrestus³²

Memorial gives expression to a cataclysmic event whose reverberations will be felt for many generations. This might explain Oswald's decision to say that this "was the earth's moment", because today we are facing a similar event: the climate crisis threatens to affect the lives of all those to come, and perhaps we can see in the Trojan War an analogous event, in the sense that it too threatened to cast a "death-curse" on all those who were to come.

At the same time as this human catastrophe plays out in *Memorial's* biographies, Oswald's doubled similes imbue the poem with a consistent, repetitive rhythm evocative of the natural cycles of the earth. In an interview, Oswald has said that "[o]ne of the reasons I repeat the similes is that you need time off from the grief. My hope is that the similes will repair what gets broken by the biographies, in the same way that the natural world does. I think of simile as a healing art".³³ Farrier has noted that Oswald's suggestion that the similes afford a measure of "healing" or "time off" seemingly contradicts his argument that the similes give expression to the notion of "haunted time". According to him, *Memorial's* similes account for the way that the present time of ecological crisis is always inflected by the spectre of the past and future effects:

[e]ach crisis of violence, when doubled, is made to also account for multiple similar crises, each singular in their deadly effect but also echoing other (past and future) emergencies. Reading the second simile, we recall the ghost of the first; yet as the poem progresses we begin to read the first with an awareness of the repetition to come ... *Memorial's* spectral similes, therefore, convey via the split temporality of ecological elegy the troubling sense of concurrent past, present, and future catastrophes.³⁴

For Farrier, the similes offer healing insofar as they generate "a sense of life as sustained by the dual gifts of sequence and synchrony"—in other words, they show that human life is a gift inherited from our generations of ancestors ("sequence") and that life on earth generally is supported by innumerable entities and beings such as microbes ("synchrony").

However, in contrast to Farrier's account of *Memorial*, I argued in the previous chapter that the similes express *enargeia*, the endless cycles of life in the nonhuman world that flourish in repetition and are entangled with the human world but not dictated by it. As described by Szerszynski, *enargeia* can be understood as a term of action which shows that "most of what happens in the world does not involve a heroic agent imposing his or her active will on a passive environment, but is a collaboration, an interaction, that entangles the entity in its milieu".³⁵ I

³² Oswald, *Memorial*, 29.

³³ Sarah Crown, "Alice Oswald: Haunted by Homer", *The Guardian*, October 9, 2011, [Alice Oswald: haunted by Homer | Poetry | The Guardian](#).

³⁴ Farrier, "Like a Stone", 11.

³⁵ Bronislaw Szerszynski, "The Grammar of Action in the Critical Zone", in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020), 346.

showed that since *Memorial's* doubled similes are interleaved with the biographies of the war-dead, the form of the poem gives expression to a gentle pattern of call and response between humanity and the natural world. Here I will build on that analysis to show that the interwoven pattern of biographies and similes depicts an entangled world of human and nonhuman rhythms which is harmonious because it is part of a natural balance, and this makes the ending of *Memorial* (to be discussed in the next section) even more haunting.

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett argues both that “enchantment functions by means of a kind of repetition” and that repetition always involves metamorphosis. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, she writes that repetition always involves “mini-metamorphoses” which can be imagined as a spiral: “[i]n this spiral repetition, things repeat but with a twist” and “sometimes that-which-repeats-itself also *transforms* itself”. But I am, of course, using the term “enchantment” in ways different from Bennett, for whom enchantment is, above all, “a state of wonder”.³⁶ As I have shown in the course of this thesis, enchantment also involves fear and the possibility of disaster. So while it might be tempting to argue that the repeated similes model the way that the repetitions of the nonhuman world might lead to the renewal and transformation of the earth’s ecosystems, I do not think that this is the case. Towards the closing stages of the poem, there is a doubled simile that describes “fire ... [t]hat lights up trees” and the trees that in turn “fall/ Under the weight of that light”, after which Oswald recounts the deaths of three soldiers, followed by a simile of dolphins hunting fish:

And KOIRANUS who came from the bright chalk cliffs
Of Crete he was a quiet man
A light to his loved ones

And IPHITUS who was born in the snow
Between two tumbling trout-stocked rivers
Died on the flat dust
Not far from DEMOLEON and HIPPODAMAS

Like when a dolphin powered by hunger
Swims into the harbour
Thousands of light-storms of little fish
Flit away to the water-shaken wall-shadow
And hang there trembling

³⁶ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 36-40, 5.

Like when a dolphin powered by hunger
Swims into the harbour
Thousands of light-storms of little fish
Flit away to the water-shaken wall-shadow
And hang there trembling³⁷

Here the two biographical passages (containing four names) are balanced by the two iterations of the simile. This is a kind of synecdoche for the poem as a whole, in which the human drama is, for the most part and until the end, balanced by the natural world. In the above excerpt, this sense of balance is augmented by the resonances drawn by Oswald between the biographies of the dead soldiers and the repeated similes. In all—including the simile of the trees that fall under the light of fire—Oswald describes a kind of brightness, redolent of her description of *enargeia* as a kind of “bright unbearable reality”. Koiranus comes from the “bright” cliffs of Crete and was a “light to his loved ones”; Iphitus was “born in the snow”, a substance that reflects the sun and light; and the dolphins (twice, due to the repetition of the simile) pursue “light-storms” of fish. And the passages share an atmosphere that is at once threatening, but also reflective of the natural cycles of life and death. The trees are consumed by the fire. Koiranus, Iphitus, Demoleon and Hippodamus all die, just as many of fish too will die in order to feed the dolphins. As noted in chapter two, Szerszynski argues that *enargeia* as a form of action is expressed not by humanity, but by the plant world but in the above sequence of similes and obituaries, Oswald shows the patterns of human and nonhuman life (and inevitable death) moving together in harmonious rhythm.

Rather than evoking the “haunted time” of concurrent crises (as Farrier suggests), *Memorial*'s doubled similes, interleaved as they are with the biographies of the war-dead, underwrite the poem as a whole with a material bodily rhythm that weaves together the natural cycles of the nonhuman world with the rhythms of human life. For much of the poem, this gives us a sense of a natural (but not idealised) balance between humanity and nature—but as discussed in the previous chapter, when we approach the end of *Memorial*, the rhythm of the poem changes to convey the increasingly volatile exchanges between human and nonhuman forces. And as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, the natural order between humanity and the earth is disrupted and unravelled as the violence mounts and the human world is finally wiped out by the forces that it has provoked. To my mind, “haunted time” is not modelled by the repeated similes—but by the individual similes that come at the end of *Memorial* and that describe a world in which humanity is absent.

³⁷ Oswald, *Memorial*, 66-67.

A World Without Us

Memorial closes with the death of Hector, who, Oswald writes, “died like everyone else”:

He came back to [Andromache] sightless
Strengthless expressionless
Asking only to be washed and burned
And his bones wrapped in soft cloths
And returned to the ground³⁸

These lines are followed by a simile, discussed in chapter two, which draws a correspondence between Hector’s death (a synecdoche for all of the fallen soldiers) and falling leaves:

Like leaves who could write a history of leaves
The wind blows their ghosts to the ground
And the spring breathes new leaf into the woods
Thousands of names thousands of leaves
When you remember them remember this
Dead bodies are their lineage
Which matter no more than the leaves.³⁹

Dying soldiers, like falling leaves, are multiple, mortal, insignificant (once dead, the soldiers “matter no more than [dead] leaves”) and yet will be followed by new life—“thousands of names thousands of leaves.” These parallels and the cycle of life they describe (fallen bodies and fallen leaves, by fertilising the ground, nourish new life) bring to mind once again the extent to which human life (and death) is entangled with human and nonhuman forces, agents, and cycles. As I argued in chapter two, in *Memorial* we see human violence pushing nature to a degree where, at breaking point, it rises up in protest. In the following pages, I turn again to the closing sequences of *Memorial* and of *Ness* and the world, emptied of humanity, that they depict. Here “haunted time” is shown to be the time after catastrophe, when the links between human and nonhuman realms have been undone and only our ghosts are present in the world with which our life was once upon a time entangled.

After describing the death of Hector, *Memorial* presents a series of ten similes, each printed just once, which are followed by one repeated simile, which brings the poem to an end. These unrepeated similes depict a brutal but lively nonhuman world, imbued with a profound sense of beauty, unease and wildness, from which humanity is almost entirely absent. Indeed, human agents are mentioned directly only once, in the second simile:

³⁸ Oswald, *Memorial*, 72.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

Like chaff flying everywhere at threshing time
The winnowers waft their fans and the wind does its work
And a goddess is there picking the grain from its husk
While a fine white dust covers everything⁴⁰

To “winnow” is to expose grain to the wind so that the unwanted chaff is blown away,⁴¹ an activity that in the gospels of Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17 is associated with the end of the world. Further, the winnowers are present through their work rather than as individual characters like Hector or Andromache. And their work (threshing), which enables the wind to separate the grain from the chaff, is completed by a goddess who picks “the grain from its husk,” while a “fine white dust covers everything,” suggesting that, at the end of this process, humanity will have disappeared from the scene. On the two other occasions that humans are mentioned—again in collective rather than particular form—they foreground aspects of non-human life. In the fifth simile, “crickets leaning on their elbows” are described as “Tiny dried up men”; and in the seventh “tribes of summer bees” as “A billion factory women”.⁴²

The eerie sense of a world without humans is augmented by the other similes, which describe various forms of energetic nonhuman life. There are “thousands of water birds [that] mill and mass in the air”, “wandering tribes of flies”, “crickets leaning on their elbows”, “strobe lit wasps”, “tribes of summer bees”, “locusts ... rippling over fields on fire”, “restless wolves [that] never run out of hunger”, and a “pouring rush [of water] that curls back on itself/ And bleeds sideways into marshes”. Each simile is printed once on the page, and none are longer than eight lines. The page is otherwise empty, evoking a world emptied of human life. As we have seen, up until this point *Memorial* was characterised by the interleaving of similes and biographies, which evoked the interaction between and entanglement of human and nonhuman realms, but that has now ended. Further, although the nonhuman world continues, the beat of human life, suggested by the repetition of the biographies, like the beat of a heart, has not just disengaged from the world that supports it but has stopped.

The conclusion of Macfarlane’s *Ness* evokes a similar sense of human absence. As I argued in chapter two, *Ness*, like *Memorial*, is structured as a sequence of alternating “views,” which move back and forward between the “more-than-human figures” (*it*, *he*, *she*, *they*, and *as*) and the human ritual intended to destroy all life. This gives the text a rhythm that suggests the entanglement of these nonhuman and human forces that are destined to collide (the actions of one side precipitating the actions of the other and vice versa). As previously remarked, the text ends with the latter

⁴⁰ Oswald, *Memorial*, 74.

⁴¹ “Winnower, n.,” *OED Online*, June 2021, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/229385> (accessed July 24, 2021).

⁴² Oswald, *Memorial*, 77, 79.

engulfed and absorbed by the former. The world this leaves is described by Macfarlane in the following way:

Willow flourishes as forest, elder jungles
each dip, each hollowness.
The falcon is bearing the day away.
The foreshore is moving as if it were alive,
because it is alive.
Afternoon moonrise. Long light. Low sun.
Slow dusk.

Shingle hush from distal to Ness.⁴³

These lines are followed by a black and white illustration of an empty shoreline, the sea, and a stormy sky. This is followed by blank pages interleaved with two pages containing just a single line of text, and then one final illustration. The first page with text recites the names of the “more-than-human figures”: “*it, he, she, they, as*”; and the second reads: “It was all sea once, in a long unbroken line”.⁴⁴ The final illustration is of a stone with a hole through the middle—this is a “hag stone”; another of these stones appears at the beginning of the text, after the description of all the “more-than-human” figures, and then others appear in the course of the book after the evocation of each individual figure.

In an article for *The Guardian*, Macfarlane explained that “[i]n folklore across Europe, to look through such a stone is to see into the future, the past or the afterlife. In *Ness*, the hagstone is an optic through which one can see nature come alive in its own right, with its own powers”.⁴⁵ Like the ending to *Memorial*, the absence of human figures and the emptiness of the blank pages, evokes a world emptied of humanity; and, if we see the blank pages as images of a world not readable by humans, we might like Macfarlane also see indirectly-presented in these empty pages a world whose nonhuman rhythms continue without us. While the ending to *Ness* is peaceful, it is also haunting in its depiction of an inhuman landscape that has been convulsed by catastrophe. The “hagstone” seems to offer us a glimpse of a future in which humanity has been snuffed out by its own actions and by the powerful forces of the nonhuman world that it has aroused.

To my mind, then, the endings of both *Memorial* and *Ness* depict worlds in which the entanglement of humanity and nature has been unravelled through crisis. Both are characterised by an eerie sense of “haunting”: their emptiness evinces the absence of the human life that was once there, and thus throws into sharp relief the precarious condition of life on our damaged planet. This sense of vulnerability is also prompted by *Memorial*’s final doubled simile, the first in which original and repetition are printed on separate pages:

⁴³ Macfarlane, *Ness*, 78.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

⁴⁵ Macfarlane, “Should This Tree.”

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks
And then it's gone.

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks
And then it's gone ⁴⁶

Each of the ten repeated-similes that come before are printed alone, on an otherwise empty page. However, in this case original and repetition are printed on separate pages, as if to evoke the empty night sky into which the star disappears. Whereas in *Memorial* the repetition of similes reflects the cyclical rhythms of the natural world, here in the last pages of the poem repetition reinforces the sense of fugitive beauty. The star is thrown and is gone—but on the next page it flares brightly again before once more disappearing, signalling the end of the poem. I have argued in this thesis that *Memorial's* “enargeia” evokes the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces, but here enargeia can only conjure, to borrow Oswald’s words, the “bright unbearable reality” of a vast world in which humanity, like the star, has been extinguished.

Macfarlane offers a remarkably similar image in “Haunting,” the final “chamber” of *Underland*. One of its chapters describes a journey taken in Greenland, where Macfarlane explores a glacier with several companions. The focus of the chapter is Macfarlane’s response to the knowledge that the glacier—like *all* glaciers—is melting as a consequence of anthropogenic global warming, and throughout he describes his sense of powerlessness and horror. But at one point in the journey, the writer and his companions glimpse what appear to be shooting stars. He writes:

How can there be shooting stars in broad daylight? I glance back at the summit and stop, amazed. The sun is silhouetting the peak, and the blue air above the top swarms with tiny silver points, swirling and darting with life-like energy and intent. There are hundreds of these glittering sprites, vanishing instantly when they pass into the shadow and out of the light. We all watch, mesmerised, for a minute or two. It is one of the most exquisite, eldritch sights I have ever seen ... these seething silver sparks, these scattering star-shards.⁴⁷

They soon realise that these are not stars but snow-covered seeds being blown by the wind. The description evokes the beauty of the moment, and the use of “sprites” suggests a sense of magic or enchantment. Yet there is an unusual but clearly carefully-chosen word that changes the tone of this sentence, namely “eldritch”, which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* can mean

⁴⁶ Oswald, *Memorial*, 83-84.

⁴⁷ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 365.

“ghostly”.⁴⁸ Macfarlane’s evocation of the beauty of the glacier is thus *haunted* by the knowledge that this is a landscape that, although on a timescale very different from the seeds, may well one day disappear.

It is instructive to contrast Oswald and Macfarlane’s description of these whipping, spectral sparks with Ovid’s evocation of rising comets, “gleaming as a star”, and rising souls in the *Metamorphoses*. In Book Fifteen, in the story of “The Deification of Caesar”, Ovid writes:

And Venus, all unseen, came to the temple,
Raised from the body of Caesar the fleeting spirit,
Not to be lost in air, but borne aloft
To the bright stars of Heaven. As she bore it,
She felt it burn, released it from her bosom,
And saw it rise, beyond the moon, a comet
Rising, not falling, leaving the long fire
Behind its wake, and gleaming as a star.⁴⁹

And then soon after in the *Epilogue*, Ovid writes that though he will one day die, his work “will endure / I trust, beyond Jove’s anger, fire and sword, / Beyond Time’s hunger”. And this means that part of him,

The better part, immortal, will be borne
Above the stars; my name will be remembered
Wherever Roman power rules conquered lands,
I shall be read, and through all centuries,
If prophecies of bard are ever truthful,
I shall be living, always.⁵⁰

For Ovid, writing in the “enchanted” world of antiquity, the “comet” and soul, both rising above the stars, represent fleeting human achievements made eternal and shining on forever in fame, triumphing over mortality. But for Oswald and Macfarlane, the opposite is true: the stars, which are seen falling rather than rising, represent the ephemerality of human existence, the possibility that one day we as a species, as a consequence of our actions in the present, may be snuffed out. Ovid’s poetry describes an “enchanted world” of gods, spirits, and transforming supernatural figures—there were superhuman powers that could cause humans to metamorphose into non-human forms like animals, trees or natural elements. According to the disenchanting worldview that came much later, humanity assumed the driving seat. Humanity was in control and was

⁴⁸ “Eldritch, adj.,” *OED Online*, June 2021, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com>.

⁴⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses: The New, Annotated Edition*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, annotated Joseph D. Reed, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 391.

⁵⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 392.

separate from and superior to the rest of the nonhuman, objectified and inert world. This is what Macfarlane has recently called with memorable succinctness the “heresy of aloofness”.⁵¹

We saw this in *Ness*, where the human figures sought to destroy their material bonds and relations with the rest of the world. In this chapter I have shown that Oswald and Macfarlane draw on the language of older forms of enchantment, in particular the notion of ghosts, to show that the life of humanity is interwoven with and therefore vulnerable to unruly material forces that have the power to extinguish us. Today, enchantment is often associated, as it is in Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, with wonder or becoming “re-enchanted” to the marvels of life. But as I have shown in this chapter and in the course of the thesis as a whole, re-enchantment is also frightening because it discloses our intimate relation to volatile nonhuman forces that might lead to potentially catastrophic futures. Oswald and Macfarlane’s new enchantment subverts the binary opposition between subject and object, nature and culture, human and nonhuman. It also, I would argue, occupies a terrain between the binary options of naïve wonder and debilitating fear—two key affects that are said to prevent climate action. In this chapter, I have described ghosts that provide new perspectives from the past, present, and future, thereby helping us to re-imagine the present. The new enchantment shows us anew the precarity of our situation, deeply entangled with lives beyond our own. In a time of environmental breakdown and global warming, when we are confronted by our entanglement with the rest of the world, it is important that we are capable of “staying with the trouble”, as Donna J. Haraway puts it.⁵² That is to say that it is crucial that we find ways to bear the brightness of our responsibilities and challenges in a precarious world.

⁵¹ Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris, “Reading Nature”, Radio interview, 29/08/2021, Australian Broadcasting Commission <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/big-weekend-of-books/reading-nature-robert-mcfarlane-jackie-morris/13502404>.

⁵² Tsing, et al., “Haunted Landscapes”, 10.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted that the “new nature writing” and the secondary literature on it had in part been defined and shaped by Jason Cowley’s introduction to the 2008 edition of *Granta* magazine, entitled the “The New Nature Writing”. In November 2020, *Granta* published another issue dedicated to the same topic, called “Second Nature.” This was introduced by an essay, written by author and conservationist Isabella Tree, which begins with a stark evocation of the crisis we are living through:

Every day we wake up to news of environmental catastrophe. Wildfires raging, ice caps melting, oceans warming, species on the brink of extinction, people displaced by natural disasters. During the course of this issue’s production, some of our writers found themselves besieged by droughts or storms, some were even forced to flee their homes due to wildfires and floods. Nature is no longer a place of refuge.¹

In 2008 Cowley had claimed that that a “new generation of British nature writers” had emerged, who “share a sense that we are devouring our world, that there is simply no longer any natural landscape or ecosystem that is unchanged by humans.”² Just over ten years later, Tree’s introduction is infused with a still greater sense of urgency—the emergency is already all around us.

In comparison with the earlier volume, Tree’s introduction and the 2020 edition of *Granta* as a whole offers a more expansive vision of the forms and voices that constitute “new nature writing”. Cowley had rather narrowly defined the new nature writing as an “experiment” conducted in the forms of “the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue”—he referred rather tentatively to an attempt on the part of the writers “to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect”.³ In “Second Nature” Tree stated forthrightly that contributions to that volume came from people who “all have a deep understanding of how nature works. Some are scientists, experts in their field; others, environmental journalists exploring the latest thinking about ecosystems and how to repair them; or poets, novelists and activists examining our responses—or lack of them—to the current crisis”. Importantly, the volume also included, according to Tree, “Indigenous voices [that] can teach us about sustainability and the fundamental importance of forging a closer, more respectful relationship with nature”. She concluded her introduction with the following call:

Never has there been a greater need for writers who can communicate about the environment in such clear, immediate and powerful ways, who can envisage the past as

¹ Isabella Tree, “Introduction”, *Granta* 153 (2020), <https://granta.com/introduction-second-nature/>.

² Jason Cowley, “Editor’s Letter,” *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing* (2008), 10.

³ *Ibid*, 10.

well as the future. The stories in this issue will, I hope, be both enlightening and empowering, transforming the way we look at the planet, and galvanising us to bring about change.⁴

Cowley wrote that “This issue of *Granta* is our modest attempt to contribute towards that long journey of reconnection [between humanity and nature] ... None of us wishes to imagine what might come after nature, when we are gone.”⁵ But there is nothing “modest” about Tree’s introduction, and no sense that we have the time for a “long journey of reconnection”. Rather, she makes the case that literature must play an empowering, transformative, and galvanising role in the face of climate change, and that it can help us to reimagine our ways of seeing and relating to the nonhuman world: “So much of new nature writing, both fiction and non-fiction, is about challenging preconceptions, traditions and cultural biases, changing a mindset”.⁶

As I noted in the introduction, one of the key debates around the new nature writing concerns how explicitly political or activist the new literature should be. But literature rarely works (with notable exceptions of course) to produce immediate political action. As Macfarlane wrote in “Why We Need Nature Writing”, published in *The New Statesman* in 2015: “Literature usually works not in straight lines but in cat’s cradles of cause and effect. Vital connections sometimes manifest themselves only in retrospect—or even remain unseen”.⁷ In that piece, Macfarlane offered an expansive and democratic vision of Britain’s ecological movement: “an ecology of mind has emerged that is extraordinary in its energies and its diversity ... a 21st-century culture of nature has sprung up, born of anxiety and anger but passionate and progressive in its temperament, involving millions of people and spilling across forms, media and behaviours”.⁸ He was writing in particular about new nature writing—though he admitted that “‘Nature writing’ has become a cant phrase, branded and bandied out of any useful existence ... I don’t know what to call this writing, nor am I persuaded that it needs a name”.⁹ Nonetheless, Macfarlane extolled the range of the new literature and advocated the “hopefulness, commitment and diversity of the current field”. I opened my introduction with Macfarlane’s 2003 article in *The Guardian*, entitled “Call of the Wild”, in which he noted a resurgence in nature writing and specifically mentioned Alice Oswald. In “Why We Need Nature Writing”, he also mentions Oswald and writes that “in 2003, I described what I saw as the green shoots of a revival of [nature writing]. Twelve years on, those shoots have flourished into a forest, richly diverse in its understorey as well as its canopy”.

⁴ Tree, “Introduction”.

⁵ Cowley, “Editor’s Letter”, 12.

⁶ Isabella Tree, “Introduction.”

⁷ Robert Macfarlane, “Why We Need Nature Writing”, *The New Statesman*, 2 September, 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/nature/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing>. Macfarlane combines the singular and plural in ‘cat’s cradles’.

⁸ Macfarlane, “Why We Need Nature Writing”.

⁹ Ibid.

In this thesis, I have described a new enchantment that leaves behind the traditional, deeply ingrained binary distinctions between subjects and objects, nature and culture, human and nonhuman; it is as fearsome as it is wondrous; and it shows the ways in which we are entangled with forces and entities beyond ourselves. It presents the world as full of powerful, interacting forces—but these forces are not the gods, spirits, or ghosts of an “enchanted” world, which were shown in the process of disenchantment to be fictions. For Oswald and Macfarlane these forces are material, but not for that reason inert or lifeless—they’re vibrant, full of agency, ranging from the fungal networks described by Macfarlane in *Underland* to the rivers described in Oswald’s *Dart*, growing from trickles to streams and then unruly rivers running to the ocean. I have demonstrated that the new enchantment depicts our deep, inextricable, and delicate entanglement with these forces—an entanglement that threatens to be unwoven by a catastrophe that we ourselves unleash, thus bringing us metaphorically face to face with what Cowley says none of us would wish to imagine—the world when we are gone.

It has been argued that any future politics must include human and nonhuman actors and be aware of the ways in which they are entangled with each other. For example, Latour writes in “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” that the task facing us in the Anthropocene is to “compose a common world” from heterogenous but entangled agents.¹⁰ He argues that “[f]or purely anthropocentric—that is, political—reasons, naturalists have built their collective to make sure that subjects and objects, culture and nature remain utterly distinct, with only the former having any sort of agency”.¹¹ According to Latour, a new politics needs to attend to the connections, interactions and interwoven responsibilities that make up the contemporary world. I have shown that the new sense of enchantment that emerges from Oswald and Macfarlane’s work describes the kind of world that Latour says we must imagine. Clearly, the new notion of enchantment that I have elaborated is not a “silver bullet” to combat the climate crisis, but it can help us begin to imagine the kind of “common world” of entangled human and nonhuman agents and forces that Latour urges our politics to recognise.

As many scholars and writers now argue, literature is one of the places that we can create space and frameworks which enable us to practise reimagining our place in the world. Indeed, both Oswald and Macfarlane believe deeply in the transformative potential of art. Macfarlane writes that “[l]iterature has the ability to change us for good, in both senses of the phrase. Powerful writing can revise our ethical relations with the natural world, shaping our place consciousness and our place conscience”.¹² Likewise, in an interview published in *The Guardian* in 2016, Oswald said

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’”, *New Literary History* 41 (2010), 484.

¹¹ Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’”, 482.

¹² Macfarlane, “Why We Need Nature Writing”.

that “[t]he job of poetry is to change the aesthetic rather than to challenge the system”.¹³ And in 2011, she described “poetry [as] the great unsettler. It questions the established order of the mind. It is radical, by which I don't mean that it is either leftwing or rightwing, but that it works at the roots of thinking”.¹⁴ And in her introduction to *Memorial*, Oswald writes:

Maybe the *Iliad*, crowded with names, is more than a poem. Maybe it's a dangerous piece of the brightness of both this world and the next.¹⁵

This is the idea with which I would like to close, namely that, as the poet suggests rather enchantingly, literature can be unbearably bright and a little bit dangerous, helping us to re-imagine our world and thus the one to come.

¹³ Claire Armitstead, “Alice Oswald: ‘I Like the Way that the Death of One Thing is the Beginning of Something Else’”, *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/22/alice-oswald-interview-falling-awake>.

¹⁴ Alice Oswald, “Why I pulled out of the TS Eliot poetry prize,” *The Guardian*, 12 December, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/12/ts-eliot-poetry-prize-pulled-out>.

¹⁵ Alice Oswald, “The Unbearable Brightness of Speaking,” *The New Statesman*, 17 October, 2011, <https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/10/homer-essay-iliad-poetry-poem>.

Bibliography

Alaimo, Stacy. "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea." In *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 186-203. Indiana University Press, 2014.

Albrecht, Glenn, Gina-Maree Sartore, Linda Connor, Nick Higginbotham, Sonia Freeman, Brian Kelly, Helen Stain, Anne Tonna, and Georgia Pollard. "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change." *Australasian Psychiatry: Bulletin of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists* 15, no. Suppl. 1 (2007): S95-8.

Alexander, Neal, and David Cooper. "Introduction: Poetry & Geography." In *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry*, edited by Neal Alexander and David Cooper, 1-18. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

Armitstead, Claire. "Alice Oswald: 'I Like the Way that the Death of One Thing is the Beginning of Something Else'". *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/22/alice-oswald-interview-falling-awake>.

Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

—*Vibrant Materialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Beudel, Saskia. "Going Under: Robert Macfarlane's *Underland*." *Sydney Review of Books*, June 10, 2019. <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/robert-macfarlane-underland/>

Butler, Judith. "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen, 181-205. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Caygill, Howard. "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Allegory." In *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, edited by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, 241-53. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Cocker, Mark. "Death of the Naturalist: Why is the 'New Nature Writing' So 'Tame?'" *The New Statesman*, 17 June, 2015.

Cohen, Margaret. "Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria." *New German Critique*, no. 48 (1989): 87-107.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Statesman's Manual; or, The Bible The Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*. 1816. Sourced from the Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford. <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dbooks>.

Cowan, Bernard. "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory." *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981): 109-22.

Cowley, Jason. "Editor's Letter." In *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing*, edited by Jason Cowley, 7-12. London: Granta Publications, 2008.

Crown, Sarah. "Alice Oswald: Haunted by Homer." *The Guardian*, October 9, 2011. [Alice Oswald: haunted by Homer | Poetry | The Guardian](#).

Cuillé, Tili Boon. *Divining Nature: Aesthetics of Enchantment in Enlightenment France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021.

Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Dimock, Wai Chee. "After Troy: Homer, Euripides, Total War." In *Rethinking Tragedy*, edited by Rita Felski, 66-81. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Dutreuil, Sébastien. "Gaia is Alive." In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 180-83. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

Economides, Louise. *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Farrier, David. *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

—"Like a Stone": Ecology, Enargeia, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*." *Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2014): 1-18.

George, Michael W. "Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, no. 2 (2010): 30-44.

Giggs, Rebecca. "What Lies Beneath." *The Atlantic*, July 2019.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/robert-macfarlane-underland/590632/>.

Goodrich, Peter H. "Introduction". In *Merlin: A Casebook*, edited by Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, 1-88. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Green, Peter. "Homer Now." *The New Republic*, June 7, 2012.
<https://newrepublic.com/article/103920/homer-the-iliad-translations>.

Hahnemann, Carol. "Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald's *Memorial*." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 22, no. 1 (2014): 1-32.

Harrison, Robert Pogue. *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Haughton, Hugh. "Water Worlds: Poets' rivers from Thomas Warton to Alice Oswald." *Times Literary Supplement*, Issue 5747, May 24, 2013: 13-15.

Holmes, Brooke. "Situating Scamander: 'Natureculture' in the *Iliad*." *Ramus* 44, nos 1&2 (2015): 29-51.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Peter Green. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

Howatson, Margaret. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Kleinberg, Ezra. *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Laplanche, Jean, and J.B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 1988.

Landy, Joshua. "Modern Magic: Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and Stéphane Mallarmé." In *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, edited by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, 102-129. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Latour, Bruno. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'". *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471-90.

— "Networks, Societies, Spheres: Reflections of Actor-Network Theorist," *International Journal of Communication* 5, no. 1 (2011): 796-810.

— *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Latour, Bruno, and Peter Weibel. "Seven Objections Against Landing on Earth." In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 12-19. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

Lee, Kyoo. "A Calligraphy of Time: Allegory (Dis)orders in the Materialist Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man." *Parallax* 10, no. 3 (2004): 6-19.

Levy, Sonia. "For the Love of Corals: Life in the Ruins of the Museum." In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 32-5. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

Lilley, Deborah. "New British Nature Writing." *Oxford Handbooks Online*, April 2017.

<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-155>.

Linne, Lena, and Burkhard Niederhoff. "[M]emories and similes laid side by side': The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald's Memorial." *Connotations* 27 (2018): 19-47.

Lubkowitz, Anneke. *Haunted Spaces in Twenty-First Century British Nature Writing*. De Gruyter: Berlin, 2020.

Macfarlane, Robert. "Call of the Wild." *The Guardian*, December 6, 2003.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview34>

—*Landmarks*. London: Penguin, 2015.

—*The Old Ways*. London: Penguin, 2012.

— "Should This Tree Have the Same Rights as You?" *The Guardian*, November 2, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/02/trees-have-rights-too-robert-macfarlane-on-the-new-laws-of-nature>

—*Underland*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019.

— "Why We Need Nature Writing." *The New Statesman*, 2 September, 2015.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing>

Macfarlane, Robert, and Jackie Morris. "Reading Nature." Radio interview with Jonathan Green, *Australian Broadcasting Commission*. Broadcast 29 Aug., 2021.

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/big-weekend-of-books/reading-nature-robert-macfarlane-jackie-morris/13502404>.

Martinez, Ann M. "Bertilak's Green Vision: Land Stewardship in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 26, no. 4 (2016): 114-29.

Mathur, Anuradha and Dilip da Cunha. "Wetness is Everywhere; Why Do We See Water Somewhere?" In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 192-203. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

Mattern, F. W. Schneider, P. Wang, and C. Li, "Continental strike-slip rifts and their stratigraphic signature: application to the Bangong/Nujiang zone (Tibet) and the South Penninic zone

(Alps).” *Geol Rundsch* 87, no. 1 (1998): 206–24. <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1007/s005310050203>.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Basic Writings*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. London: Routledge, 2004.

Minchin, Elizabeth. “Translation and Transformation: Alice Oswald's Excavation of the *Iliad*.” *Classical Receptions Journal* 7, no. 2 (2015): 202-22.

Mitchell, H.H., T.S. Hamilton, F.R. Steggerda, and H.W. Bean. “The Chemical Composition of the Adult Human Body and its Bearing on the Biochemistry of Growth.” *The Journal of Biological Chemistry* 158, no. 3 (1945): 625-37.

Moran, Joe. “A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing.” *Literature & History* 23, no. 1 (2014): 49-63.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Motion, Andrew. “*Ness* by Robert Macfarlane and Stanley Donwood Review – forces of nature.” *The Guardian*, 14 December, 2019. [Ness by Robert Macfarlane and Stanley Donwood review – forces of nature | Robert Macfarlane | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/14/ness-by-robert-macfarlane-and-stanley-donwood-review).

Muldrow Jr., Milton, Edward C. M. Parsons, and Robert Jonas. “R. Shifting baseline syndrome among coral reef scientists.” *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0526-0>.

Neimanis, Astrida. “Alongside the Right to Water, a Posthumanist Feminist Imaginary.” *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 5, no. 1, (2014): 5-24.

Osborne, Peter and Matthew Charles. “Walter Benjamin.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/benjamin/>.

Oswald, Alice. *Dart*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.

— “Alice Oswald reading *Memorial*.” Hibrow. Published November 28, 2018. Accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1coxNKhct0>

—*Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011.

—*The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*. London: Faber, 2005

— “The Unbearable Brightness of Speaking.” *The New Statesman*, 17 October, 2011.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/10/homer-essay-iliad-poetry-poem>.

— “Wild Things.” *The Guardian*, Dec 3, 2005,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/03/poetry.tedhughes>.

— “Why I pulled out of the TS Eliot poetry prize.” *The Guardian*, 12 December, 2011.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/12/ts-eliot-poetry-prize-pulled-out>

Ovid. *Metamorphoses: The New, Annotated Edition*. Translated by Rolfe Humphries. Annotated by Joseph D. Reed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018.

Pache, Corinne. “‘A Word from Another World’: Mourning and Similes in Homeric Epic and Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Classical Receptions Journal* 10, no. 2 (2018): 170-90.

Paige, Nicholas. “Permanent Re-Enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics.” In *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, edited by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, 159-80. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2015.

Pinard, Mary. “Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter.” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 17-32.

Popescu, Dan Nicolae. “‘þis Gome Gered in Grene’: Ecocritical Notes on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” *Meridian Critic* 23, no. 2 (2014): 47-54.

Porter, Max. “Interview with Alice Oswald.” *The White Review*, August, 2014.

<https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-alice-oswald/>

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Coda: Concept and Chronotope." In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene*, edited by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, and Heather Anne Swanson, 169-74. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Purdy, Jedediah. "A Nature Writer for the Anthropocene." *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2019.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/06/jedediah-purdy-reviews-robert-macfarlanes-underland/591574/>.

Purves, Alex C. "Wind and Time in Homeric Epic." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140, no. 2 (2010): 323-50.

Ralph, Iris. "An Animal Studies and Ecocritical Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Neohelicon* 44 (2017): 431-44.

Raphael, David Daiches. "The Impartial Spectator." In *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, 32-42. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Rudd, Gillian. "'The Wilderness of Wirral' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 23, no. 1 (2013): 52-65.

Runcie, Charlotte. "Is Alice Oswald Our Greatest Living Poet?." *The Telegraph*, June 21, 2019.
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/is-alice-oswald-our-greatest-living-poet/>.

Rutger J. Allan, Irene J. F. de Jong, Casper C. de Jonge. "From Enargeia to Immersion: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Concept." *Style* 51, no. 1 (2017): 34-51.

Schaffer, Simon. "On the Difficulty of Animating the Earth." In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, edited Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 292-95. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by John Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Smith, Jos. "An Archipelagic Literature: Re-Framing "The New Nature Writing." *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17, no.1 (2013): 5-15.

—*The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Smith, Robert Rowland. *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Stone, Alison. "Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 231-53.

Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *The Myth of Disenchantment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Szerszynski, Bronislaw. "The Grammar of Action in the Critical Zone." In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 344-49. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Thacker, Jack. "The Thing in the Gap-Stone Style: Alice Oswald's Acoustic Arrangements." *Cambridge Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2015): 103-18.

Thubron, Colin. "Our Guide to the Underworld." *The New York Review*, July 18, 2019. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/07/18/robert-macfarlane-guide-underworld/>

Thurman, Judith. "Alice Oswald's Homeric Mood." *The New Yorker*, August 17, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/24/alice-oswalds-homeric-mood>.

Tree, Isabella. "Introduction." *Granta* 153 (2020). <https://granta.com/introduction-second-nature/>.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, and Heather Anne Swanson. "Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene." In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene*, 1-16. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Weil, Simone. "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force." *Chicago Review* 18, no. 2 (1965): 5-30.

Whitmarsh, Tim. "Black Achilles." *Aeon*, May 9, 2018. <https://aeon.co/essays/when-homer-envisioned-achilles-did-he-see-a-black-man>.

Wisher, Izzy. "Cave Art." *Aeon*, 11 December, 2020. <https://aeon.co/essays/ice-age-art-making-was-a-tactile-joyous-exploration-of-the-world>.

Wordsworth, William. *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth Series: Volume 1*. Edited by Jared Curtis. Humanities-Ebooks, LLP.